

The Glory Trail

Meredith Reed





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By
Meredith Reed

*The
Glory
Trail*

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To
My Mother

The Glory Trail

THE GLORY TRAIL

I

It was the first warm, fragrant evening of spring, and Mary Malvern was sitting on the bench under her cherry tree, watching for Uncle Gabriel, who had promised to stop on his way home from the post office with her mail and a package of garden seeds. There was scarcely enough daylight for her to discern readily even familiar objects, but she knew that she would have no difficulty in recognizing Uncle Gabriel's horse, Old Hundred, whose bony, white figure she expected every minute to appear, stalking like some gaunt specter along the darkening road.

All at once she sat forward, her head dropping to her hands. From somewhere up the mountain came the clear, piping tones of a flute. Nearer and nearer they came, winding in and out the turnings of the trail, and sinking and rising with the hollows, until, at length, they floated through the dim fir grove that surrounded her white house. With arms outstretched she sprang to her feet.

"Peter!" she called eagerly, reaching out her hand. "Peter Piper!"

The slim figure broke into a run and shot past her.

"Here I am, Peter Piper."

He wheeled round and groped for her hand. "I couldn't stop; I was going so fast," he panted when he came back to her.

"I saw that you couldn't."

She led him to the bench and sat down beside him. Looking

closely at his face, she perceived that his lips were twitching with excitement.

"I thought that you were never coming down again," she said. "It's been three weeks now."

"I couldn't come; they wouldn't let me," he explained, laying down his flute. "But to-night I had to come. I ran away. I had to tell you," he cried, his words tumbling fast after one another in his eagerness.

"Tell me—what?" she inquired, her eyelids slightly lifted.

"That the wood-violets are out, all along the trail. There's a big, purple blanket of them on the hill. They have opened their lazy, sleepy eyes at last, and, oh, such a violet smell!" He drew in a quick breath in recollection. "I was going to bring you a handful, but I thought that you would rather come and find them growing."

"Yes, I should, Piper, but I wonder how you knew."

Without answering he leaned his slim, warm body against her and rested his dark head familiarly in the hollow of her arm.

"It's never really spring," he said, "until the violets are out, and to-day they are running up and down the trail. They must have come overnight. I am pretty sure that they were not here yesterday. You have to step carefully or you'll tread on them. There have never been so many before. I went to sleep up in the violet beds near the cascade and when I woke up, I was right on the edge of the cliff."

He spoke rather gleefully about his little adventure but, with a quick, involuntary movement, she drew him closer to her.

"You mustn't be so careless," she remonstrated, "but I don't really wonder that you fell asleep for I did the very same thing the other day. The wind and the sunlight made me drowsy."

"To-morrow you'll go up and find the violets?"

"To-night, if I could see."

"You could find them by the smell."

"I'll go up the first thing in the morning."

"I think that they are bluer than ever."

"Even the stars are blue to-night, Peter Piper, and they flicker, some of them, as if they were going out."

"What keeps them burning all the years?" he asked with an abruptness of inquiry to which she was quite accustomed.

"The housekeeping angels see to it that they are kept filled with oil, I guess," she answered with a hint of laughter in her voice. "There must be some housekeepers among the angels, I suppose. They can't all be musical and play harps."

But her answer did not satisfy him as it would have once, even a short time since, and by that she knew that he was growing up and away from her, and that his mind was groping out toward the invisible and the unheard, for light and understanding.

"We shall have to get a book on astronomy, you and I," she said seriously after he had remarked that he would rather play a flute than a harp any day, and sat silent, still wondering what made the stars burn. "Probably Dr. Carruth has one. I have always thought of the stars just as stars, beautiful, little twinkling lights. I've been afraid that I shouldn't love them so much if I analyzed them and began to calculate size and distances. I like to feel that they are near and friendly, and science teaches that they are very far away."

"Don't we love the things we know very well, Miss Mary?" he asked with an intensity of feeling that she took, with a quickening of her heart, for another proof of his growth.

For the minute she could not answer him and, when she did speak, it was only to say that to-morrow she would call at the parsonage and see if she could get the book. She was sure that Dr. Carruth would have an Astronomy and a Botany, too, and she and Peter Piper would study together.

"You were playing a very appropriate song," she said, "when you came down the trail. It sounded good."

"What are the words, all of them?" he asked, leaning forward and reaching for his flute. "I've forgotten one line."

She hummed the song in low, full tones.

"The year's at the spring
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hillside's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn;
God's in His heaven—
All's right with the world!"

"The dew on the hillside was sweet this morning, Miss Mary. It was like cool raindrops on my feet."

"Barefoot so soon?"

"But it's spring."

"Yes," she agreed, laughing, "but, Peter Piper, one can catch cold even in the spring, you know. Probably you have been wading in the brook already. You have! You don't need to tell me; it's written all over you!"

"And there was a meadowlark out in the field," he went on joyously, "and a snail on the thorn, though I had to hunt for him. I know where there are lots of snails now. You told me once a long time ago that when I found all those things, I should know that spring had come to stay."

"And you were determined to find them all, even if it took a very long time?"

He didn't speak, but she felt the quick nod of his head against her arm.

"How do they know in the city when spring has come?" he asked.

"In the city, Piper, they must know, I think," she answered

thoughtfully, "by the hurdy-gurdies, the marbles, and the jump-ropes, and, maybe, by the keep-off-the-grass signs in the park. They put them out in the spring."

"Our ways are best," he declared with a gravity that amused her.

"Yes, infinitely better," she agreed, "but for all that I'd like to hear a hurdy-gurdy again and have it set my feet to dancing. Once I heard one at the corner of a drab city street. It was playing a gay, lilting air that took you right out of the city and set you down on a far-off, wind-swept hill that the big clouds leap across. And there was a monkey! Such a comical, little creature! What else were you going to tell me about this morning?" she broke off suddenly to inquire.

"I could feel the blue of the sky," he began, his mind still half on the monkey. "It was full of cobweb clouds and they were tossing about like the witch-grass when the wind blows through the meadow."

She could not see him for the sudden mist in her eyes. The piper was so much like herself that it startled her, because for this likeness she held herself at least partly responsible.

"Tell me about Pippa again, Miss Mary."

"Pippa was a little girl who worked in the silk mills of Asolo and who had but one holiday in the whole, long year. When her holiday came, she awoke very early, before the sun was up, I think, and at once hopped out of bed in order not to miss a single minute of her one beautiful day. As she trod the hills of Asolo, she sang a hopeful song about the year's being at the spring, which made all the people who chanced to hear it better and happier—and Peter Piper is—"

He did not let her finish, but jumped up from the bench and stood facing her.

"Miss Mary," broke from his quivering lips, "down at the post office to-day they said that you will soon be leaving the mountain."

It was not the violets alone, then, that were responsible for all his breathless excitement.

"You can hear almost anything at the post office," she said impatiently, her forehead gathering into perplexed lines. "But I wonder just why they should have said that; probably, because they are not sure that I am going to stay or because they know that there's not anything to keep me here any longer."

"There's me!"

"Yes, there's you, Piper! They must have forgotten that."

"I thought maybe you were going up the Glory Trail that you told me about. Once, when you were a little girl, a very, very long time ago," he began for her.

"Oh, not so long ago as that, Peter Piper," she laughed, spreading out her hands in a gesture of dismay. "You make it sound as if it were a thousand centuries or so."

"You used to believe," he continued, "that you lived on an enchanted mountain."

He had given her broad enough hint of what he wanted and he paused there for her to take up the thread of her own story, a story, which, with each retelling of it, seemed to hold greater fascination for him.

To-night, however, she made a brief conclusion of the tale, omitting all the colorful, ingenious touches which she, from time to time, to please him had added to it.

"And that some day," she went on, "I should follow the steepest, craggiest of all the trails, and that when I reached the top of the mountain, if I liked the looks, I should hurry down the other side."

"Where they have the jump-ropes and the marbles to let them know that spring has come," he interrupted, dropping down beside her.

She nodded. "But that if I didn't like the looks, I should run straight home before the moon dropped from sight be-

hind the hills. It was to be quite wonderful, following the Glory Trail, because there would be all kinds of thrilling adventures and surprises along the way, and at the end, well, no one could tell exactly what would be at the end, but, whatever it might be, it would be sure to be beautiful beyond all expectation."

He brought out the question that she had always known he would be sure to ask sooner or later. She only wondered now that he had never asked it before.

"And why didn't you ever go, Miss Mary?"

"I started three or four times, Peter Piper, but something always pulled me back and held me here."

Something in her voice made him slip his slim fingers into hers. "You wouldn't be leaving the mountain in the spring-time, would you, Miss Mary?"

"Of course not! The very idea of such a thing. Why, I have planted my garden with larkspur, holly-hocks, phlox, mignonette, and sweet alyssum. There never was such a garden as mine is going to be. I have never had time to make such a lovely one before. Even the Glory Trail couldn't entice me away from it. This is going to be my wonderful summer, right here on the mountain, Peter Piper, and then—"

"And then what, Miss Mary?"

Her voice dropped. "Why, then," she said, "I shall be staying right here, watching the big storms block up the Glory Trail with snow and ice."

"Sometimes I have wanted to climb the Glory Trail, too," he said, edging away from her, as if he were confessing a fault or a longing for something to which he had no right to aspire.

It was not easy for him to voice his longing even to her who shared all his secrets, but now that it was out, he was relieved, especially when he heard her hopeful words, which

made him feel all at once as if something within him were singing and dancing with delight.

"And you will, Peter Piper. I was never surer of anything than that some day you will climb the Glory Trail. I shall start you up myself."

"Why can't you go with me?" he asked, his heart fluttering like the leaves of the cherry tree.

"No; you'll have to go alone, but I shall be waiting for you to come back. There always has to be some one stay behind, you know, because there's never any fun coming back unless somebody is waiting for you."

He accepted her conclusion, glad that he had told her everything; it hadn't seemed right or pleasant, keeping a secret from Miss Mary; then, too, he had been troubled by the fear that he had been trespassing on her property, or stolen a dear possession away from her. Such a strange feeling it was! But when he told her about it, she laughed away his fears, understood, and, as usual, made everything plain and beautiful for him.

"A star has just shot over the mountain, Peter Piper."

"Like a big firefly?"

"A very big one."

"What does it mean?" he questioned.

"Some people say that it means a stranger is coming."

They sat silent, the boy's hand in hers, while the darkness enfolded them, and the cherry tree dropped down its fragrant white petals about them. Presently the frogs in the swamp behind the house set up their shrill peeping.

"They sound lonesome," remarked the boy. "Seraphina says they make her want to cry. There's lots about the spring to make you want to cry, isn't there? You'd think it would be in the fall, when everything is dying. I must go. She'll scold me for staying down here so long."

"Why haven't they let you come down before?"

He was reluctant to tell her, but she insisted that she must know.

"I shan't mind, Peter Piper. What do they say about me?"

"They are afraid that I'll think that I belong to you; that you'll make me different from them. That's what Seraphina told me. They want everybody to believe that I belong to them."

It was some time before she spoke and her face was strained and white.

"But you don't belong to them," she said at length, "and if you don't come down again soon, I shall see Mr. Skinner about it. I wish that you would take the road to-night, even if it is a little farther. The trail is so rough."

"But I know every crook and twist in it," he assured her. "I'm glad that you are not going away. I'll tell Uncle Gabriel to-morrow."

"All right. It's strange that he hasn't come. He would have taken you home. He is probably entertaining the boys at the store with some of his stories, or, perhaps, I didn't have any mail and he forgot the seeds. I am going to walk a little way up the trail with you, just to the first turn. Don't forget your flute."

Some time later, when he had left her, she stood in the path, thinking of everything the boy had said and of her promise to him. The fragrance of the violets was wafted down to her and, to her quick fancy, they seemed in some vague, inexplicable way to be a living part of the far-away, joyful notes of the piper's song of spring.

II

Dr. Daniel Gordon was walking down the corridor that led to the convalescent children's ward. Unless there were something important to prevent, he visited the ward every night before going home. It rested him, he said, and did him worlds of good to see the children.

To-night, because there was so much for him to do, he meant only to go to the doorway and wave a good-by to the youngsters, but the sight of them, smiling and holding out their arms to him, was irresistible, and before he knew it, he was sitting on Billy Bradstreet's bed, forgetful of everything except the happy faces and big eyes of the little boys whom he was holding spellbound by the true story of a bear which once upon a time he himself had killed.

"The most skillful and the most unprofessional of surgeons," the superintendent, in a burst of impatience, had once called him, her keen eyes flashing disapproval, when they chanced to light upon him in the midst of a downright rough-and-tumble with two little fellows who were about to be dismissed from the hospital.

"Just want to be sure they are fit," he explained, smiling provokingly over his shoulder at her. "Remember their legs when they came in? It's worth a lifetime to see them scrapping like that, and this is my recreation, you know."

"His work has never lost its novelty for him, and I suppose that's what keeps him so young while the rest of us grow old," she remarked to one of the nurses, a frown still on her

forehead but a whimsical smile tugging at the corners of her severe mouth. "He misses having children of his own and he adopts all these in place of them."

To-night she happened to glance into the ward just when he had finished the bear story and, in response to their "just one more, please," was beginning one of his most spirited tales of adventure. Already their eyes and mouths were open with wonder as they sat up in their white beds and listened in breathless expectation.

"You'll not scare them so they won't sleep, Doctor?" called the superintendent from the doorway, her voice gentler than usual.

"No," he answered, "I won't. My bears are always friendly, you know, and never harm good children. They will all sleep like tops and have glorious dreams when I go."

They begged for another story, but he shook his head and picked up his hat from the floor, where he had dropped it.

"I am going to miss the stories myself," said the small, friendly-eyed nurse as she stepped briskly about putting things in order for the night.

"You will have to tell some stories yourself, Miss Allen."

"They never would put up with mine after hearing yours," she replied, her voice a little muffled, coming from a deep drawer over which she was bending, arranging bottles, rolls of cotton, and bandages that seemed to possess an unusual knack of getting out of order.

The room was very still; most of the children having made up their minds that the doctor was not going to entertain them any longer, had settled down to sleep. Their low, even breathing was the only sound in the quiet room.

The little nurse was quiet, too, trying very hard to find words for something which she wanted to say to the doctor before he should be gone from them forever.

"I don't know how we are going to get along without you,

the children and I," she finally managed, and flushed with the consciousness that she had said a very simple thing, and not at all what she had meant to say.

He waited for her to finish her work and close the drawer before he spoke again. Then it was to ask a rather surprising question.

"You like it here well enough to stay, Miss Allen?"

"Why, Dr. Gordon, why should you ask that?"

"Just because I want to be sure. It is going to make me feel very content to know that you are with the children."

The doctor rose and crossed the room to the long, west windows and stood looking over wide stretches of brown, where here and there a thin patch of green was showing, and off through bare trees to the sunlit river.

"It is very beautiful here," he remarked, as if noting the fact for the first time.

"It is, Dr. Gordon," she agreed. "I have always meant to ask you just how the hospital happened to be here."

"Well, it isn't a very long story," he answered. "I was out driving one day in October when I first saw the big estate with its broad fields sloping to the river, and the immense old house that, in spite of its need of repair, preserved a kind of shabby elegance. I was on the lookout for just such a place, and when I saw it, I recognized it—that's all."

"And the name?" she queried. "That's something I've been going to ask you about, too. Everybody seems to take it for granted, but nobody really knows anything about it."

"Because I have never told anybody. Maybe I was afraid that they would think it was a foolish whim of mine. Once, when I was a little fellow, I had to go to the hospital and I was scared and homesick the whole time I was there. I made up my mind, as youngsters do, that some day I was going to have a hospital of my own for children, away from the city, out in the fields, near trees and a river. It was to have low

windows, like these, that a fellow could see out of. I gave my dream-hospital the name that hangs over the gate here—‘Happy House.’ It was, I think, by way of defiance to the place in which I was so miserable, or thought I was. Odd name for a youngster to pick out, wasn’t it? I must have seen it somewhere in a book. Anyway, as the saying goes, ‘health spells happiness,’ so I decided that even if it had been a boy’s fancy, the name was appropriate and I would let it stand. The dream-hospital was a great many years coming true but at last—it’s here.”

“Yes,” she repeated, “it is here, and the name is appropriate because it’s a house that has made a great many children well and happy. But it isn’t the house so much; it’s the spirit in it that makes it worthy of its name. I only hope that we can always keep the hospital just as it is now—for you.”

A grave smile illuminated for a brief second the paleness of his face, which seemed to her like a transparent shade behind which a light had been quickly flashed, and as suddenly withdrawn. With his natural reserve, from which among the children he was more free than anywhere else, he had concealed his disappointment, but once, when he had turned toward her abruptly to answer a question, she had seen too startlingly clear to admit of any doubt, the deep anguish of his soul stamped full and unrepressed upon his sensitive face.

“I’ve bothered you lots,” he apologized, noting the patient weariness of her eyes and mouth. “It’s always been a real joy to me to drop in here for a little while. But you must know that without my telling you.”

She would have remonstrated about his having bothered her if he hadn’t made a quick movement to go. His words reminded her of something one of the older nurses had said to her the first week she was in the hospital.

“Dr. Gordon is so boyishly frank and natural that even the youngest nurses at times feel older than he, like his grand-

mothers, and consequently responsible for safeguarding his interests. But when you see him in the operating room, you feel like getting on your knees to him."

She was conscious of something of that feeling now as she watched him stoop slightly to pass through the door, swing round to wave to them all, the wide-awakes and the fast-asleeps, all snug in their beds, then turn slowly and pass down the hall.

As far as he was concerned, everything was done and he was anxious to get away. But at the door of the operating room, Miss Atwood, the superintendent, tall and severe in her stiffly-starched white dress, put out a detaining hand. Abrupt of speech and manner, she came directly to the point.

"I have had my say, Dr. Gordon," she began with a crispness of utterance that gave weight to every word. "It's altogether the most senseless thing I've ever heard of. Nothing short of ridiculous. They will find out their mistake when it's too late. You know the old saying, 'give a person enough rope and he'll hang himself with it.' I have done all I could; now I am just biding my time to see how things are going to be run."

"More professionally and less sentimentally, perhaps," he could not refrain from putting in, with a quiet laugh at the recollection of all their little differences.

"I surrendered long since, Dr. Gordon, although you may not have known it," she confessed. "You are leaving the city to-morrow?"

He nodded.

"I wish that you weren't going alone."

"Do you think that I need looking after?"

"In a way, perhaps," was her noncommittal answer.

"But not where I am going."

"You don't know how to take care of yourself; you never have from the time you were a boy. You've never spared

yourself. In no time you'll have a big following of patients and—”

“No, you have no reason to say that,” he cut in bitterly. “You seem to forget that all that sort of thing is over for me.”

Her eyes flashed fire. “Stuff and nonsense! For a few months, yes; for the future, no. Nothing is over; everything has just begun.”

“I should have to refuse to face the facts if I were to be so optimistic,” he told her.

“Dr. Dan,” she said, unconsciously slipping back to the familiar name by which years ago she had known him, “I have been wishing these past few days that my old friend, your mother, were here to set us all straight.”

Imperceptibly he started. Sentiment from Miss Atwood sounded strange, even with her brisk voice softened.

“You must know that I have never failed to wish that,” was all he said.

The superintendent and his mother, who had been less than twenty years older than himself, had grown up together in a prim little New England village among the hills. They had been graduated together from the same country Seminary, after which Nancy Heywood had married a young physician, John Gordon, by name, and Sybil Atwood had gone West for professional training. Distance had held them apart throughout the years, but an uninterrupted correspondence had kept their friendship warm. Daniel Gordon never saw his mother's friend until he became an interne in a large Western hospital where she was a nurse.

But it seemed to Sybil Atwood that she had known him all his life, from babyhood up, so full had been his mother's letters of him.

John Gordon died before Daniel reached his second birthday and from then on the mother's sole interest was in her boy. All the wealth of her generous sympathy and love she

gave to him, and of how nobly he responded to it her letters were a constant proof. Sybil Atwood herself came to feel more than an ordinary touch of pride in the boy whom his mother described as "a little too shy and reserved, perhaps, but full of fun—a regular boy, studious, especially in science, with inclinations toward his father's wonderful profession."

There was not, even when he was completing his education, a hint, in the closely penned lines Nancy Gordon sent regularly to her friend, of the struggle that she was having to help put her son through school, or any trace of downheartedness, but only joyful accounts of Dan's honors, his brilliance, about which she said she just had to boast a little to somebody, and the distinction he was winning for himself among professors and classmates; and of how, in spite of all his work, he always found time to run home for the holidays, and to write to her once or twice every week.

There was for all the reserve, which he had never fully outgrown, a quiet forcefulness about his face and manner which impressed itself upon his mother's friend when she met him in the Western hospital, and which led her to expect great things of him. She was not surprised to hear, ten years later, that he had a hospital of his own for crippled children, but she was somewhat taken back when she received a letter from him, asking her to assume the superintendency of the hospital, which, to quote his own expression, was "the culmination of all his hopes."

"Come on, and help me make an old dream come true," he had written in characteristic, boyish enthusiasm, and without weighing the whys and wherefores or asking any questions, she had packed up and gone. For this she had never been sorry.

"It has been my one regret," the doctor was saying, "that just when I could have given her everything, she slipped

away. I suppose that you have no idea of how much she did for me."

"Not from her telling, but knowing her, I can guess."

"At least she is spared this," he reflected. "It's the most reconciling thought I have had. It would have killed her."

"No, it wouldn't; she had too much common sense. By the way, what does Clarice say to all this?"

From the apparent ease with which she put forth the question, he had no suspicion of the difficulty she had had in bringing herself to the point where she could ask it. It had been in her mind a half dozen times during the week, but his self-contained manner had forced it back every time it had risen to her lips.

His slight hesitation before answering her was evidence enough to her that the question had struck home.

"She doesn't say very much," he replied slowly.

"Generously trying to frame an excuse for her," was the thought that sped through Miss Atwood's agile mind.

"She naturally feels the chagrin of the situation; otherwise, it hasn't affected her very much, I believe; at least, she hasn't said much about it. Of course, in a way it has been a keen disappointment to her. She never approved of the hospital, you know. I am sorry for her."

"She is going with you, I suppose."

He flashed her a look of genuine surprise.

"I'm not sure, but I think not; I couldn't ask her to give up so much."

"So much?" she repeated, thoughtfully.

"All her friends and the things she's been used to all her life. She would hardly know how to do without them, I'm afraid."

"But there would be you," she said. "Forgive me, but do you think that you are doing right, being fair to her, in letting her give you up so easily?"

"Isn't that rather an unusual way of putting it?" he asked with a smile of self-disparagement that annoyed her. "I had never thought of the matter from that point of view."

"Naturally not, but it's a very sane one, nevertheless."

She had the feeling that she was probing old wounds and hurting in the process, but there were a few things that for her own satisfaction and because of her interest in him, she had to know, and ruthlessly she pursued her questioning.

"But she might want to go even if you didn't ask her. You wouldn't refuse to let her go if—"

"There would be no question about that, Miss Atwood," he answered simply. "I always want her."

"Toni is coming along fine," she announced abruptly by way of changing the subject. "Dr. Prince says that the operation was one of the cleanest pieces of work you ever did, a real triumph."

The approach of the house doctor brought their conversation to an end.

"I have an appointment with him," she said, glancing at her wrist-watch. "Dr. Fletcher is on his way to my office now. Good-night, Dr. Gordon, and the best of everything."

She extended her hand, which he took in his quick, firm grasp.

"Good-night, Miss Atwood."

Gordon stood by the window where they had been talking until he heard the door of her office close, then once more turned down the corridor leading to the outside door.

Someone called to him from across the hall. "Dr. Gordon, will you step in here a moment, please?"

Gordon at once recognized the smooth voice of Dr. Bruce, temporarily at the head of the hospital, and wondered with a shrug of impatience what further he could want of him.

As he pushed wide the half-open door and entered his old office, he took in at a glance the five men, seated around a big

mahogany table in the center of the room. They all looked up at him simultaneously through dense clouds of tobacco smoke, which made the air oppressive. He acknowledged their curt nods with a slight inclination of his head, and took the chair Dr. Bruce had, with a summary wave of his hand, indicated. They were to all appearances very much engrossed in a conversation which they did not let Gordon's presence interrupt in any way.

The five men were all doctors, more or less connected with the hospital, most of whom were older than Gordon and all of whom he had outdistanced in professional achievement. They had been his friends; might be now for all he knew.

He had waited ten or fifteen minutes for Dr. Bruce to make known his business with him, and was about to excuse himself when, to his surprise, he noticed that there was a man in the room of whose presence until now he had been entirely unaware. Directly opposite him, and partly obscured by the door which Gordon upon entering the office had left open, sat a short, thick-set man on whose bulky shoulders a round, florid head appeared squarely to rest without the help of any intermediary neck. His heavy features and fat-encircled eyes seemed strangely familiar to Gordon. He could not place the man, but for some inexplicable reason, the flaccid, smug countenance took him back to his college days and certain attendant happenings of which he had not thought for years. Certain he was, however, that this man was in some way connected with them.

After another five minutes, Dr. Bruce rose leisurely, pushed back his chair and prefaced his words with a cough, which might have been a result of the smoke or of a slight feeling of discomfiture on his part. It was in either case quite apparent to Gordon that the doctor was not at his accustomed ease.

"Dr. Gordon," he began in a low, unctuous voice, "I thought that you might be interested to meet your successor

and to know before you leave that everything is going to be in efficient hands."

The doctor had a peculiar manner of emphasis, which in his own opinion gave greater import to his remarks.

"Let me present Dr. Digby," he went on. "I believe he told me that you are acquaintances of long standing."

That was all, but his cold, steel-blue eyes plainly added, "Ah, a little surprised that we have a successor so soon; rather taken off your feet, I should say."

But Gordon showed no surprise as he rose to meet Dr. Digby, who, at the mention of his name, had sprung from his chair and stretched out a bulky hand with no less alacrity than he would have shown if a button had been pressed to impel him mechanically to action.

"Yes, indeed, we are old friends, Gordon and I," he said in rolling tones behind which, for all their cordiality, might be detected a note of triumph.

"Yes, I remember you perfectly now, Dr. Digby. As soon as I heard your name, I remembered. Until then I couldn't place you. You have grown heavier."

As a matter of fact, Gordon recalled that their brief and rather forced intimacy had sprung up when they were both competing for the same prize and that after the five hundred dollars had been awarded to himself, Digby had seemed very willing to let their acquaintance die a natural death; furthermore, that throughout the rest of their course at the medical school, Digby had apparently never been able to forgive Gordon for having won out over him and had taken pains to show his dislike for him on every possible occasion.

"Sorry to hear about all this disturbance, Gordon," he hurried on with a look that gave the lie to his words. "But as long as it had to be, glad that I could step in, so to speak, and fill in the breach."

There was nothing in his words to give offense, but their

very affability and his ingratiating manner led Gordon to infer that there was no detail of his unfortunate affair of which his successor was not already in possession. Over Gordon there swept a feeling of revulsion for this bland, aggressive man whom they had rushed into his place. Fate had a way of playing queer tricks on people. Digby! Digby at the head of his hospital! His mind shrank from the thought.

"We've just been looking over the place," continued Digby with an air of proprietorship. "Fine prospect here. We've been talking over just a few changes in the running of things; expecting Mr. Howard in any minute. Right to business, our motto. Same old top, you see." This, while rubbing his hands briskly together in smug satisfaction.

The same "old top," indeed! Time had mellowed neither his harsh voice nor his obtrusive manner. He was still going on his springing way in much the same fashion as, Gordon remembered, he used to spring about the college halls, and spring nimbly to his feet when called upon in class, whether or not he had any ideas about the subject under discussion. "Springy Digby" his classmates had dubbed him.

Surprise, chagrin, keen disappointment prevented Gordon from expressing anything except the wish that Dr. Digby and the hospital might have a happy and prosperous year. This he did courteously, if somewhat absently, and from the depths of his heart, although he felt, even as he uttered the words, that his wish was futile.

"I shall do the best I can to keep things moving. As for you, Dan," he continued with an intimacy from which Gordon mentally recoiled, as he did physically from Digby's powerful grip on his arm, "my advice to you is a long holiday. You're not looking fit. You take life too seriously. Watch me. I shan't grow old on the job, and the place won't die on my hands either."

Gordon was only vaguely aware that someone passed by

him as with bowed head he went down the flight of stone steps to the driveway, and looked up in something of surprise when he heard his name.

"Ah, Dr. Gordon, you are leaving to-day, I take it."

"Yes, Mr. Howard," he answered, turning to face the old gentleman who was standing on the top step, his hand on the door, "and I am glad that we have met for there's something that I have been wanting very much to say—"

"Then make it brief," cut in Mr. Howard. "I have important things to attend to and an appointment to keep. You do not apparently understand that anything pertaining to you cannot greatly concern me now."

Bitter resentment and scorn burned in the speaker's eyes, but Gordon, looking straight into them, spoke calmly.

"I should not detain you to hear about my interests, but you have always been ready to listen to a common interest of ours, something that concerns both of us more than it does anyone else in the world—and that's the hospital that you built and gave over into my hands. This is my only chance to ask you if the plans we talked over so recently can't be carried out regardless of my going, and if you won't use your influence against any drastic, any radical changes being made just now."

In his brief acquaintance with Digby, Gordon had perceived that his idea of a progressive man was one who could set on foot the greatest number of new enterprises, and discard as many old systems as possible, no matter how effective they might have proved themselves to be. Already he had spoken of new plans and changes to be made. With this in mind, as little as he wished to cast any reflection on his successor, Gordon could not, for the sake of the hospital, refrain from expressing to Mr. Howard a timely word of warning.

"Your wishes," remarked the old gentleman with a cynical twist of his thin lips, "will be given very little consideration. Kindly remember that your authority here is at an end." He

thumped with his cane vindictively as he added, "Your name will not be mentioned here and, if necessary, I shall instruct Miss Atwood not to furnish you with any reports of our work. Give yourself no uneasiness about the hospital. We have, through Dr. Bruce, found a very able successor, who has impressed everybody very favorably. Remember, Gordon," he finished, his tall, bent frame trembling with anger, "that, as far as I am concerned, you have ceased to exist."

He would have opened the door, but Gordon, who had gone up the steps, put out a detaining arm.

"Wait!" he commanded with a peremptoriness that forced the older man to obey in spite of himself. "I was not speaking for my own interests or hopes, but I forced myself to say what I did because this hospital always has been and always will be the greatest concern of my life. You didn't need to remind me that my authority here is at an end. That may be only fair and right but—"

He stopped abruptly, perspiration pouring down his gray face, strained with lines of care and disappointment.

"I'm going out of my hospital a broken man, a failure," he said at length. "But I don't want the hospital to fail. It's going to mean everything to me now to know that the work here is being carried on wisely and well."

The cold, even tones that followed his impassioned ones stung Gordon to silence.

"This is no time, Gordon, for giving way to sentimental talk. This outburst of yours is only another proof that you need a long vacation. You must think that I forget very soon. I'll bid you good-day," and with a summary wave of his cane, he turned and opened the hospital door.

Gordon stood just where Mr. Howard had left him, his mind a tumult of conflicting thoughts and emotions, resentment, bitterness, despair, pity for his old friend, with whom time and circumstance had dealt so harshly, and whose eyes

frenzied grief had closed from a true perspective or a clear vision.

He had not waited many minutes when a powerful red roadster appeared round the corner and rolled leisurely up the graveled incline, picking up speed when the driver, as he indicated by a wave of his hat, perceived the doctor's figure.

"Just in the nick of time," called a hearty voice as the car came to a stop. "You haven't been waitin', sir?"

"No, Clem," answered the doctor, climbing into his seat. "You couldn't have made better connections."

A contented smile caused the mouth of the big Irishman to widen as he released the clutch and swung round the circle. Down the long driveway shot the car, and out to the main highway, which followed a straight course, for a considerable distance, between brown fields and the river. For three or four miles they rode without a word between them, the doctor surprised at Clem's unusual taciturnity, but grateful to be left alone with his thoughts. He was, however, the first to speak.

"Everything gone all right to-day, Clem?" inquired the doctor, looking straight ahead.

"Yes, sir."

"Engine seems to be working shipshape again."

"Tiptop."

"New gardener the right sort?"

"Best we've ever had."

"The man you expected came to fix the garage?"

"Yes; roof tight as a drum now."

No sound for another mile or two except the rhythmic chugging of the engine. Then an unexpected outburst from Clem.

"Damn 'em, all of 'em," he exploded.

The doctor was jerked suddenly forward as the roadster, having reached the top of the hill, gave a sharp lurch like a

shyng steed, and slipped into a reckless speed that defied all signals of command or caution.

Clem, the doctor knew from past experiences with him, was, without being strictly conscious of what he was doing, racing the car to give vent to his feelings.

"Better slow down a bit, hadn't you," suggested Gordon, "and cool the engine before the next hill? The train must be about due."

In an instant Clem's feet were on the brakes.

"Which engine did you mean needed coolin'," he asked with a dry smile, "mine or the car's? There's the train whistling now. We might have been caught on the grade with a dead engine." He raised his voice as the express with a screech and a roar swept down the track. "I've had the chance to do a lot of observin' this afternoon while I have been sittin' up at the hospital awaitin' for you and it hasn't put me into a very peaceful state of mind."

"But I thought that you had just come."

"Well, seein' as how you left orders for me to be up there at four, I got there, and now it's almost six."

"Six, did you say, Clem?" asked the doctor, incredulously, snapping out his watch. "I must have lost all track of time to-day."

"You have seen the papers, sir?"

"No, did you get one?"

Clem nodded. "It's all in the papers to-night, his reasons for your going stated in full. I wanted to tell you, hoping you had not already seen it."

"It never occurred to me but that he would spare me that."

"Leave it to him, no! It's on the front page with your picture. It's all Howard's doings. He thinks he runs the city with that gold-headed cane of his that he don't need any more than I do a pink parasol."

"He exerts a great deal of influence with his newspaper. I suppose I might have known."

Clem gripped the wheel, stepped on the accelerator, and threw out the clutch.

At the next corner, a hurdy-gurdy was playing a lively tune; on the sidewalk, a crowd of boys were shooting marbles, and in the park, a little farther on, three little girls in pink, green, and blue dresses were skipping rope and laughing merrily.

"Spring must have come, Clem!" exclaimed the doctor, leaning out of the car to inhale a long, deep breath of air. "By Jove, it has, Clem; you can smell it everywhere. It's been pretty slow getting here, but come it has at last. It takes the hurdy-gurdies, the jump-ropes, and the marbles to make us sure. They always know."

Another mile and the car rounded the last curve, glided up a broad driveway, lined on both sides by maple trees, and stopped in front of a massive brownstone house, imposing and cold in appearance.

The doctor made no movement to alight; instead, he swung round in his seat and looked steadily at the man beside him.

"Clem," he said, "I may not have another chance as good as this to tell you a few things I want to. There isn't much to say. You know that I am looking to you to keep things running smoothly, and as far as possible to carry out all Mrs. Gordon's wishes."

"I sure will, but do you know what she calls me?" he inquired with a chuckle. "'The inclement O'Lary.' I think it's rather good myself. To-day I am the 'inclement O'Lary,' as you may have noticed. I suppose it's my temper she's referrin' to, and good reason she has to do the same."

They both laughed, but the doctor said, "I have always thought, myself, that your name fitted you exceedingly well. It occurred to me when you were telling me about the news-

paper item that I have always thought a great many things about you I have never told you."

"Not in words, maybe," the other said, and hurried on to cover up the huskiness of his voice. "You can rest easy about everything here, sir. I'll keep everything shipshape for you."

"It's worth a great deal to know that."

The doctor explained to him in a few words the things which he wished attended to, and stepped from the car. As he turned round to ask a question, Clem shot out a big, clumsy hand and laid it awkwardly on his arm.

"Damn 'em!" he choked, his red hair and blue eyes both on fire with indignation. "Damn 'em! I could shake the whole, hypocritical, jealous lot of 'em till they howled for mercy! And now, I've got that off my chest, I'll feel like myself again. What time do I call for you in the morning?"

"Ten o'clock."

"Right," he said, and circled off to the garage.

For an instant Gordon stood still, looking after him, then turned, slowly climbed the flight of steps leading to the house, and pushed open the door.

III

Half an hour later, when Gordon entered the dining room, he found it empty. His place, however, was set for him and at his ring a white-capped maid promptly appeared.

"Isn't Mrs. Gordon to be at dinner?" he asked, glancing at the empty chair across the table.

"She dined, sir, half an hour ago."

"I see." Then, after a pause, "I believe, Hilda, that I'll have just toast and coffee to-night."

"Why, yes, sir—only—"

"Only what?"

"Nothing much."

"But there is something."

"Well, you see Annie got up something a little special to-night, some of the things you like best. I wasn't to tell you, sir. She's been trying to keep dinner hot without overcrisping anything. You see we wanted to do something a little different for you seeing as how Clem told us you were going away."

She fingered the stiff frill of her white apron with one hand while with the other she nervously smoothed back her pale, straight hair from her wide forehead.

"You are not ill, sir?" she asked, concern in her voice.

"No, only tired," he answered, glancing down.

"I'll get the toast and coffee at once," she said, her hand on the door.

"Not a bit of it, Hilda. Of course, I want the dinner. It was prime of Annie to plan it for me. Tell her so for me and

don't mention the toast. That was just a whim that happened to take me for the moment."

The flicker of a smile which for an instant lighted her dull eyes abundantly repaid him for the pretense of enthusiasm that he had summoned. It was pretense for clearly he could not to-night look forward with any degree of zest to the dinner, which would be served to him as formally and as perfectly in every detail as it would be if Clarice were there with a table full of sparkling guests. The toast and coffee would have suited him much better, with Clarice across the table to pour the coffee, and toast the bread, a slice at a time, as they wanted it. Not that they had ever eaten this way together. Clarice, he knew, would consider it a falling-away from the dignity of their position to descend to such commonplaces. But he often imagined, nights like this, when he felt especially tired, how it would seem to dismiss the maids and eat in the big, bright kitchen, just for a change from the somber dining room with its dark wainscoting and heavy furniture. He used to like to wander, now and then, into the kitchen, the sunniest, homiest spot in the house. Once, a long time ago, when Mrs. Gordon had found him there, she had lifted inquiring eyes and walked away with a light laugh which he hadn't understood, but which had kept him from soon going there again.

His dinner over, he went into the library and sat down by an open window, through which vagrant breezes with a tang of spring in them drifted into the room. He must have been there half an hour or more when he heard someone coming down the stairs, and knew from the fragrance of violets which suddenly permeated the air that it was Clarice.

"Dan! In here in the dark!"

He sprang to his feet and pressed the button behind his chair, throwing the big library, rich with velvet upholstery and exquisite furnishings, into a glow of mellow light.

"Clarice!"

For a full minute she stood quite still in the doorway, a pucker deepening between her carefully arched eyebrows, her lips drooping in a graceful pout.

"Well, aren't you ever going to speak?" she asked in a thin, high voice that just escaped being shrill. "I want to know—"

"About the hospital, you mean," he responded eagerly. "I have been waiting to tell you everything. You have seen the papers, of course."

She raised a slim white hand in protest as she advanced meticulously into the room.

"Not about the hospital; about me, Stupid, about my gown. I don't believe that you have even noticed I'm wearing a new one. Celeste sent it only this morning."

"You put it on for my approval?" he asked smiling.

"If I did, I don't believe that you have seen it yet," she evaded. "You do have the strangest way of looking at a thing without really seeming to see it."

From the moment she had appeared in the doorway, his eyes had never once left her face. The gown he had not especially noticed, but now that she exacted his opinion of it, he good-naturedly brought himself to attention.

Without missing a detail of her exquisite person, he surveyed her slim, boyish figure from its cropped, golden head, down the long, straight line of shimmering, opalescent green to the silver-slipped feet, and back again to the thin face with its delicate features and narrow, pale blue eyes, into which he looked long and somewhat quizzically.

Out of her cool, green silk, which, with its silver lace and finely cut stones, emitted quick, little scintillations of light, she had the appearance of rising, like a mermaid, out of the green, frothing sea foam that glints and sparkles in the sunlight; or of lifting herself like a pale, delicately-tinted flower from a chalice of quivering leaves.

"Well?" she queried, drawing herself away from his inspection.

He said very sincerely the first thing that came into his mind.

"You've been thinking of having a portrait of yourself, Clarice. You ought to have it done in that and call the picture *Spring!*"

"Dan, dear, you are so simple," she protested with a lift of her chin. "You looked just now as ill at ease as a school boy."

"There isn't anything any better one can say to a girl, is there, than to tell her she looks like the springtime, especially when one means every word he says? Why, Clarice, spring has come to-day. Clem and I found it out when we drove home. The air was full of it, the hurdy-gurdies, the marbles, and the jump-ropes were out, and when I saw you in that green gown and smelled the violets, it came to me that you were the very incarnation of the season."

It was a long speech of the kind for him, who was not given to many words, and he hesitated a minute before going on.

"I'm afraid that I have been stupid sometimes, but I always miss you when you are not here. I was hoping that you would be at dinner to-night."

She flushed uneasily. "You have no idea how very busy I have been all day. Spring doesn't mean hurdy-gurdies and marbles to me; it means a lot of fuss with modistes and milliners over new dresses and hats."

She enumerated the day's appointments and their attendant vexations in which he had always tried to interest himself, but which now seemed to him remarkably petty. There were at stake with him infinitely bigger things than she had any comprehension of.

"It's a shame all that got into the papers," she finished, pouting. "It seemed as if we had had enough notoriety with-

out that. I supposed that with all your prestige you would somehow manage to head off those insolent reporters. They came here to-day to find out your plans."

"And did they put them in the papers, too?"

"Haven't you read the papers?" she asked, her eyelids lifted in surprise.

"No; not yet."

"Well, they have made a very pretty story of it all. If Mr. Howard didn't own the biggest newspaper in the city—"

"If lots of things," he said wearily. "I have been through it all in my mind so many times, and gotten nowhere that I'm through 'ising.'"

"I don't believe you realize how hard all this has been for me, Dan."

"Hard for you, Clarice?"

The genuine surprise of his voice kindled her resentment.

"For me, yes. Why not? You didn't suppose that I would escape, did you?"

"Escape? Escape what, Clarice?"

"Everybody's talk," she answered swiftly, her voice rising with indignation, "about you and your failure. Don't think that you have been the only one to suffer."

"You have suffered, too?" he asked, penetrating her with his gaze.

"Of course, I have. But not in the way you mean. I haven't been morbid or sentimental over you and the hospital, but—well, nobody in my position would like to hear everybody—"

"It has been hard for you," he interrupted her to say, "but it isn't as though I had done something disgraceful, something to be ashamed of. I am guilty of nothing. You have that to remember."

"But as long as people don't know that, what difference does it make?"

"It ought to make all the difference in the world to you and me," he answered quietly.

"But it doesn't," she maintained with an upward fling of her small head. "It makes no difference at all. It's what people think that counts, say what you will. The other talk is mere sentiment."

He answered nothing to that and, after a little, she went on, "I guess everybody knows by this time that you don't confide much in me."

For a brief instant their eyes met. Then hers fell.

"My work has always seemed to bore you so, dear," he said, "and in this last affair I have tried to spare you all that I could. These past days it would have meant more than I can tell you to talk things over with you, and my silence hasn't indicated that I haven't needed or wanted you. You must understand that. To-night I am going to tell you about the hospital."

"Oh, Dan," she broke out impatiently, flinging herself onto the divan, "let's try to forget about the hospital for once, and all those stupid doctors and nurses. It is all over now as far as you are concerned, and it's a good thing for you that it is. You don't realize it, but you are getting frightfully narrow when all you can think and talk is shop, with never a minute to do anything interesting."

Her entire lack of comprehension of his suffering, and her cold indifference were only too apparent.

On her high, narrow heels, she pirouetted across the room to the long, oval mirror where she surveyed herself with a smile of approval, turning about slowly to take in every line and curve of her perfect gown. Then, lifting her silver draperies, she floated, with a swift, bird-like motion, back the length of the room, perched on the arm of his chair and drew her lips into a graceful pucker.

"Such a stupid, serious old doctor," she whispered, close to his ear.

He had never quite gotten used to these quick changes of mood in Clarice. At times they almost took him off his feet, made him wish that he understood her better, and resolve to try still harder to do so.

He reached out his hand to her, but, at his touch, she flew away and settled herself comfortably in a corner of the divan.

"I don't suppose you realize what a strain it has been, being the wife of a surgeon," she said as he left his chair for a place on the divan beside her.

"No," slowly, "I don't suppose that I have."

For the minute she was nonplused by his acquiescence to what she had expected him not to comprehend.

He was too utterly worn in mind, body, and soul to be vexed with her; reasoning with her, or explaining, he knew from past experience, was out of the question. There was nothing to do but to let her finish and then, perhaps, they could hit upon some more cheerful subject of conversation.

"I was going to tell you about Toni," he said, at last, by way of turning the conversation into pleasanter channels.

"Toni? Toni?" she repeated, searching her memory for a recollection of the name. "Oh, yes, I remember. You mean the little Italian boy who was hurt. Well, what about Toni?" she asked indifferently.

"He is going to walk again. The operation was very successful. I thought you would be glad to know."

"I am certainly relieved to know, because Archer was not to blame. The child ran right out directly in front of his car, just as we turned the corner into that smelly Italian quarter. Dan, sometimes you act as if you thought that Archer and I, because I happened to be riding with him, were responsible for the accident. I am sure I don't see what more he could

have done, paying every cent of the hospital expenses, and sending money to his mother besides."

"It was only decent for him to do that much. It was a narrow escape for Toni."

"And now they've taken Archer's license away."

"Perhaps it will teach him a lesson; he is a reckless driver. You have acknowledged that much yourself."

"Dan, sometimes I wonder if you are a little bit jealous of Archer."

From the look of surprise he gave her she was confident that such a thought had never entered his mind.

"Is there any reason for me to be, Clarice?" he asked, pushing away her hand from his face and seeming to penetrate her very soul with his level gaze.

"Well, there might be, you know," she answered provokingly with a swift, bird-like tilting of her head. "You are gone all the time and, Dan, you are so high-minded and serious I never could live up to your ideals. I tried to at first, but I soon gave up. Sometimes I used to wonder what you were thinking about when you would sit for an hour at a time and never say a word. I used to want to ask you, but I always concluded that it was something about the hospital. You have always put that ahead of me."

"No, I have not meant to put that ahead of you, but I thought that in asking you to share my hopes for the hospital and my hopes to help the children that I was giving you the very biggest thing I had to offer. But I want you to be happy."

"In these days things are different; a woman doesn't have to bury herself in her husband's profession. She has her own life to live. If a husband isn't concerned in his wife's interests, why need she be in his? The only sensible thing under such conditions is for each to go his own way."

"You mean—?" he questioned sharply, raising his head from his hands.

She met his incredulous look with an amused smile.

"No, not that, old Serious; we've had notoriety enough for awhile, haven't we?" she asked with a candor that made him wince. "I only meant that you could enjoy the things you like and I, the things I like, without our worrying too much about each other. As for Archer, it was ridiculous of you to take me seriously. He is a good boy and handy to have around when the inclement O'Lary is indisposed. He makes a good chauffeur, and is always ready and agreeable."

"I was wondering—speaking of Toni," he said, "if you wouldn't like to have Clem drive you over to the hospital, now and then, with some flowers this summer. I have always kept them pretty well supplied."

"You would send flowers to that hospital!" she expostulated.

"Why not? They are for the children."

"And you want me to take them there?" she asked, looking down into her violets.

She flung out her slender hands in a gesture of vexation.

"I should honestly like to please you once in a while, and although it seems foolish and sentimental to me, I'll tell Clem to fill the car with flowers every day and take them to the children; he can just strip the gardens. It won't matter to me. I shall not be here," she announced, looking up at him between half-closed lashes to note the effect of her words.

"But I thought that you had decided to stay here and take week-end trips in the car and yacht. I thought—"

"You thought all wrong, you see, old dear. I have changed my plans. I do quite often, you know. You really didn't expect me to stay here, did you?" she inquired, flashing up at him her most engaging smile. "I have decided that you will not be the only one to go. I am going, too."

"You are," he exclaimed with a surge of emotion that lighted both his face and voice. "That's mighty fine of you,

Clarice. It was more than I could ask or expect you to do but —why, you don't know how happy this has made me."

He rested his hand on her shoulder and bent nearer to her flushed face. "You are sure that you can be contented there? It will be so altogether different from anything you have ever been used to. I shouldn't want you to feel dissatisfied. There would be lots of new things for you to find out about, picnics with just you and me, fishing trips,—and all sorts of things," he said, his face glowing with enthusiasm. "I am not sure but that we should have a jolly time of it. We used to have some good times together. Anyway it would be a change for us both and out there, away from all this rush and scurry, maybe we should get to know each other better."

He had risen, and stood looking down at her. So demure, and lovely in her cool, fragrant dress, she appeared, sitting on the edge of the divan, her hands folded quietly in her lap, her slim, silver slippers crossed, her fair head bent over the violets, which rose and fell with the quick beating of her heart, he felt that nothing mattered, could ever matter now that she was standing by him, heart and soul, like this. This was the real woman and his highest thought of her was justified.

He held out his arms to her, but she drew away from him, smoothing out the lace which his too eager fingers had touched.

He waited for her to speak, but she was strangely silent. For once in her life she was contrite and seriously sorry to disappoint him.

"I didn't mean that I was going with you, Dan," she brought out at last, without lifting her eyes. "It hadn't occurred to me that you would think of such a thing."

With her words there came to him the sensation of having fallen from a high cliff or of having been suddenly plunged into cold water.

"I meant to tell you before," she said to cover up her dis-

comfiture, "but lately you have been here so little and I have been frightfully busy. The Arley-Robinsons have teased and teased me to go with them on their Mediterranean cruise, and, when this affair of yours came up, I decided to accept their invitation. Lucile and Drexel are going. I didn't see why I shouldn't run away as well as you," she finished with an assumed gayety which did not, however, deceive him.

Usually his frank face was an open book for her to read, but to-night the inscrutable expression of his countenance gave her no clew to his thoughts, and thus disquieted her.

"I don't see how it can matter so much," she said. "You didn't expect me to go with you, did you?"

"No, of course, I didn't expect that, and I suppose that it is really better as it is, that you are not going, I mean," he answered, sitting down again beside her.

She laid her slim fingers on the cuff of his smoking-jacket.

"You only hoped that I would be sentimental enough to bury myself in that forsaken country," she added in an aggrieved tone. "Sometimes you seem to forget that I am twelve years younger than you, Dan. I am not done with life at twenty-six if you are at thirty-eight."

Her entire lack of sympathy ceased to make any impression upon him, and, when he spoke, it was very dispassionately.

"No, of course, you are not, but when you spoke—"

"You naturally jumped at conclusions. But it's all right, isn't it, Dan? You don't really care?"

Without a word, he got up slowly from the divan and, after a long searching look into her face, he turned abruptly and crossed the room to the window.

She sat for a few minutes, tapping her foot impatiently on the dark velvet carpet. When he didn't come back to her, she glided over to the piano, and from a pile of music picked out a popular waltz, which she played with all the force that her spirited touch with the aid of the loud pedal could furnish.

"Do you remember the Liszt Rhapsody you used to play so much?" he asked, wheeling about when she had finished with a triumphant crescendo.

"I think so," she answered, "but not from memory. It's in the cabinet. I have been doing so much light music at the club that I am not sure I can manage it, but I'll try if you want me to."

While he was searching through piles of worn music for the rhapsody, she bent over the polished surface of the long stool on which she sat, and smiled contentedly at the reflection it gave back to her. Celeste might well be forgiven for her negligence when she could produce such a gown, a triumph to her art. What would they all say to it, she wondered, with a swift glance at the clock.

After a considerable poring over of folios, he found the rhapsody, placed it on the piano and took his place beside her to turn the leaves and, incidentally, to watch her long, supple fingers as they sped with, what seemed to him, miraculous accuracy up and down the keys. Although he made no pretense to being anything of a critic, his appreciation of music was sufficient for him to know that, while her interpretation was not over-sympathetic or delicate, she played with spirit and with a faultlessness of technique that now and then approached brilliance. What mattered more to him, he liked to hear her, and it was a long time since she had played to him.

From the rhapsody she swung with a dash into a gay waltz, and then, with another glance at the clock, pushed the music aside.

"That sounded like old times," he remarked.

"Before the hospital—when you were at home more," she said with deliberation.

The clock had just chimed eight when a maid appeared in the doorway to announce a caller. Mrs. Gordon hurried into

the hall, as if she were expecting someone, and returned to her husband a few minutes later, her lips parted in a doubtful smile.

"You don't mind, do you, Dan," she began sweetly, "even if it is your last night at home? The Merriwethers have an extra ticket for the opera. You know I have never heard '*La Traviata*.' Of course, the regular opera season is over, and so this is something very special and I ought not to miss it."

"It seems strange that you should think it necessary to excuse yourself," he said dispassionately. "Don't you usually go when and where you want to?"

What was the use of his asking that, she wanted to know, assuming a frigidity of manner and drawing herself up to her full height.

"You knew that Archer was coming?" he asked.

"Why?"

"Nothing much; only I was just simple enough, as you would say, to imagine that the dress, and the violets, and everything were for me to-night because—"

He broke off with a short laugh which jarred discordantly upon her.

"I just wondered why I was so stupid, why I didn't drop to it that you were going out. Why didn't you tell me? Did you know?"

She didn't like his direct questions that she could not evade; she didn't want to be chastised; she wanted only to be comfortable, and happy, and admired.

"No, yes," she hesitated, meeting his level gaze reluctantly as she fumbled with the truth. "That is, I wasn't exactly sure. They didn't know until the last minute whether they could get a box or not."

"And Archer is going in the capacity of a chauffeur, I suppose?" he did not refrain from asking. "But I forgot; he's

lost his license. That will make it rather inconvenient for you."

"Dan," she cried indignantly, "you never said anything like that to me before in your whole life."

"I was only quoting your own words when I said that."

She looked at him a little doubtfully.

"We've had quite an evening together, for us, anyway, haven't we? You have things to attend to, you said, so you really don't mind, do you? It would be rather stupid for me here."

Her eager preparations to be off made it unnecessary for him to answer any of her questions. Without a word, he held her silver-gray cape for her, wrapped the old-rose scarf, which she handed him, about her slender throat, and touched his lips to her hair as she prompted him to do, by standing on tiptoe so that her head just rested under his chin.

Very lovely she looked as she stood before him in the shimmering velvet wrap, whose long, flowing lines added height and slimness to her boyish figure. But it was with a detached air that he looked at her, almost as if she were someone he was seeing for the first time, and he remarked somewhat disinterestedly the delicate contour of her flowerlike face, her hair, the color of a dim light, her eyes that in their pale blueness were almost lusterless, her short nose with its piquant tilt, which marred the otherwise regular profile, and her tightly compressed lips, which could droop or laugh at will so easily.

"What is it, old dear?" she asked, her good humor quite restored. "Anything wrong with me?"

"No, you are quite all right, I should say."

"I wish that you would tell me the way you usually do that you are glad to have me go and have a good time. I should have a pleasanter evening if you would."

"Well, then, I am."

"Truly?"

"Yes, truly."

That seemed to satisfy her for, flirting a kiss in the direction of his forehead, she was away lightly, as if on wings.

Gordon watched her pass out of the door and close it behind her.

IV

Presently the door opened, just after he had switched off the lights, and a jovial voice boomed across the darkness.

"In the dark, Gordon? Damned tough on you. We'll all miss you even if you haven't had time to hobnob around with us much."

There was unmistakable sincerity behind the brusque words. Gordon sprang to his feet and again touched the button behind his chair.

"Thank you, Fred. I appreciate that."

"Feel kind of sheepish to be stealing away your girl tonight, but my folks would take her. She's always the life of the party, you know. Glad to hear that little fellow my boy smashed into is coming along all right; pretty narrow escape. I hope that it will teach Archer a lesson. Clarice says that you are leaving to-morrow."

"Yes."

"Well, good luck; I'll have to be off; they are calling me. I'd rather stay here and have a good smoke with you, but they wouldn't let me off. Belle thinks it's a part of my education to attend the opera. I may be able to catch forty winks during some of the quiet scenes. It's all Greek to me, you know, but all in a lifetime. There's the horn again; I suppose we are late; I hope so; good luck."

"Damn it all," he remarked to himself, as he breezed out of the room like an October wind, "I should like to send Clarice back to him; hasn't she any eyes in her head?"

But his only comment, as the chauffeur assisted his portly frame into the car, was, "The doctor looks pretty well shot up, Clarice."

"Oh, do you think so?" she asked in much the same tone in which she might have replied to a conjecture of probable rain. "I hadn't noticed that he looked any more tired than usual. He has been killing himself with work anyway, and it has all been so unnecessary. Well, at any rate he is going on a long holiday, you know. Who sings the leading rôles to-night, Archer?"

Mrs. Gordon's apparent unconcern and a nudge from his wife discouraged Mr. Merriwether from venturing any further remarks on the subject, and he settled back doggedly into his seat with the lassitude of one who has a dreary evening in prospect.

Alone in the library, Gordon fell to thinking of a great many things; first of the hospital, then of Fred Merriwether, putting in long days at his factory and giving over his evenings to things he loathed—receptions, dinners, balls—where, for all his faultless attire, to which his wife religiously attended, he always appeared like an overgrown boy at his first party. After much persistency his family had succeeded to some extent in curbing his exuberant joviality and toning down his big voice, but, essentially, in spite of all their efforts, he was unchanged. What did life hold for Fred except work and the kind of play he didn't want? Why all this trying-to-keep-up fever anyway?

The delicate fragrance of Clarice still lingered in the dark room. How lovely she had been in that springtime gown of hers! How easily she had gone from him! She could not know how much, to justify his own belief in her, and to prove that of others false, he had wanted in this last extremity to discover the real woman whom he had always been sure was there, hidden securely behind her gay nonchalance. It

was not her fault, perhaps, that he had not been able to find her, any more than it was his that she had misinterpreted his motives on every hand. He was impatient that a comment made by one of the surgeons at the hospital at the time of Toni's operation should recur to him now.

"Mrs. Gordon is too supremely selfish, too shallow-minded, too trivial to be concerned with anybody's trouble but her own. She is the most self-centered, soulless person I have ever known."

The remark, which he had unwillingly overheard, had so incensed him that he remembered it word for word. At the time, he had felt that the criticism was unjust. People didn't understand her. He himself didn't. But she was not to blame for that. It was just that he had failed with her as he had with everything else. If their marriage, as she had often suggested, had not been a success, it was, he believed, because they were so entirely unlike, because they had so little in common. In his ardor for his profession, he had from the first been disappointed over her want of sympathy, her lack of interest in his achievements, but, having accepted her unwillingness to share his deepest hopes, he had plunged more and more engrossingly into his work, had given to it his body, mind, and soul, to the exclusion of every other thing, even at times, he acknowledged, to all thoughts of her. She wanted to be a gay, flitting butterfly. There were, when they were first married, times of temptation when he would have liked for the sake of being with her to forsake his calling, and become a butterfly, too. But these times grew less and less frequent as the years went on and he made up his mind to the inevitability of things. They had, however, gotten along rather happily together until a little less than two years ago when he had entered upon the realization of his boyhood dream.

He could never forget the night he had rushed home to her with the glad news that his old friend, Mr. Howard, had

bought the Ridgely estate and given it to him to convert into a children's hospital. She had met his announcement with cool indifference and had said in cutting tones, "Don't expect me to approve of all this, Dan. It only means that I shall see less and less of you, and you are a rather distinguished looking husband to accompany one to parties, you know. But I'm not going to stay at home alone and wait up to hear how your latest operation came out."

She had never forgiven him for keeping to his purpose against her wishes, and had shown her disapproval in many ways, but, until to-night, he had not fully realized how deep-seated her grievance was or how far it had estranged her from him. He could not reason things out now; he only knew that he had wanted her to-night more than anything else in the world and that she had gone from him without a single regret.

It was seven years since he had brought her home to the big, elegant house in the library of which he was now sitting. To be more exact, it was seven years since he had come there with her, for Clarice had insisted upon staying in her own luxurious home. It would save lots of fuss, she told him, and be ever so much nicer than the rather ordinary bungalow which he had planned for them to live in until his income should allow him to provide something more pretentious. He wanted the bungalow, but she held to her point. In her own home she could have a half dozen servants; only one maid in the bungalow—scarcely room for her.

"Why, Dan, there wouldn't be room for my clothes there," she remonstrated, laughing, when he showed her the plans for their house—a white bungalow with a quaint door, and a porch over which, to amuse himself, he had drawn a clambering vine of roses.

"Perhaps, Clarice," said her father, who had been proud to announce his daughter's engagement to Dr. Gordon and not

a little relieved to give her into the keeping of such certain hands, "perhaps he would enjoy giving you a home. Men like to do that for their wives, you know. Daniel's a proud man and he has taken a great deal of pleasure in planning this little house for you. Some day, at the rate he is getting on, he will be able to build you a castle. But I dare say you won't be any happier there. Your mother and I began life together in a cottage and, if she were here, I think that she would tell you with me that they were the happiest years of our life."

"Don't be trite and sentimental, Dad," she remonstrated with a shrug of her slim shoulders. "Why, who of all the other men I have known wouldn't jump at the chance of settling down here with no worry and expense? But then, Dan's different."

"Yes, he is different," agreed her father, "and that's something for you to get down on your knees about."

"Dan is wonderful, but he's not social enough and is old-fashioned in some of his ideas. But I am going to make him over," she announced cheerfully with a tightening of her firm, little mouth.

In the end Gordon had yielded to her wishes, burned the plans for their bungalow, and gone with her to the stone mansion, where, surrounded by an atmosphere created by other people's choice and arrangement of furnishings, he had never come to feel completely at home.

One corner room on the third floor he had appropriated for his own and there, oddly cluttered, were his best loved books, some of which he had treasured since boyhood, athletic trophies, and a few pieces of furniture he had saved from his old home. On the shelf was his mother's picture, and one of Clarice at nineteen, taken at a garden party, where he had first seen her.

It was a long way back to the garden party, but Gordon mentally traversed the distance as he sat in the library. There

was much for him to think about, much for him to try to understand, but, after a great deal of searching thought, his mind refused to work, and he went upstairs to his room where he sat down in his comfortable old chair by the window from which he could look down onto the river, unrolling itself in the hazy moonlight. A distant clock struck twelve slow, ringing notes, then one, and two. But Clarice did not come. It was then that, closing the door of his room, he went to bed.

He was up early the next morning as there were still several things he must attend to before leaving. From the door of her room, he saw that Clarice was sleeping as soundly as a child, with her head on her arm, and her lips parted in a contented smile. He had to go down town and probably by the time he returned, she would be up.

At nine, when he came back, Hilda met him in the hall with a note. He read it through once, twice, three times before he seemed to comprehend its significance.

"Dan, dear," it ran. "I expected to be home before twelve last night but a cousin of Fred's, an awful bore, insisted on taking us to a dinner party. Fred was almost rude about going. He slept right through the opera and Belle kept poking him with her fan until I was sure that he must be black and blue. We stayed to dance a while after the dinner and this morning I overslept. Now I have to hurry right off as I have an appointment with Celeste. I would cancel it but I have to keep on good terms with her nowadays. After all, we had quite an evening together and good-bys are so stupid and sentimental. However, I'm going to try to be in to see you off. I think you said your train goes at eleven. If I don't make it, good-by and do take care of yourself."

There was a little cross just below her name which, he understood, she meant for a kiss, the kind she threw to him jauntily when she was in a hurry to be off.

A couple of hours later, Clem having deposited him with his luggage and left him with several injunctions concerning his future welfare, Gordon stood outside the track on which his train was already made up, his eyes searching the hurrying crowd for a certain familiar figure, boyishly straight and slim.

A little lame fellow, trudging past, reminded him of Toni, who would soon be walking on two straight legs, and of Prince's remark that the operation had been little short of a miracle. But that all was a thousand years ago, and belonged to an old existence of which he now had no part.

There were only five minutes more. He was conscious that people were looking at him, some of them doubtless recognizing him; others, wondering at his anxious face, but his eyes never left their searching. He pulled out his watch again. One minute more.

The gateman closed the gate, except for a narrow space which he grudgingly left for stragglers, who were always sure to appear the last minute, wild-eyed, and tugging hard for breath.

"All aboard," he shouted with a decisive snap of his jaws as Gordon, with a last, backward glance, sidled through the gate and swung himself onto the rear car of the long train, which was beginning to vibrate into motion.

There was only a handful of passengers, he noticed with a casual glance, as he settled back into his chair. Most of them would probably leave long before he reached his destination. As the great wheels gathered speed, rolled away from the network of tracks, and sped out toward the single, winding, uphill course they were to follow, he began to realize for the first time that he was off on what Clarice had called a long holiday.

An old lady in the chair in front of him was reading a coarse-typed book, which she held straight out in front of her

and at such an angle that Gordon could with little difficulty follow the drift of the sentence. A name on the page caught his attention and he found himself reading on to see what it had to do with the story:

"And, at length, after much travel and many wearisome days, they came, spent of body and mind, to a country called Lotus Land, where everything was fresh and amazingly beautiful, and where, in the enjoyment of its delights, they presently forgot their homes and old-time friends, and, shaking off the fears of darkness and despair which had bound them like fetters, they became new creatures, glorying in their perfect freedom, their happiness, and the abundant life into the possession of which they had come."

A foolish myth, but it held him. Lotus Land! That was his country, the land to which every turn of the wheels was speeding him. There, if he followed the plan that Prince had laid out for him, he would forget his old associations, mention no names or places connected with the past, become a new person, leading an entirely different existence in new surroundings and among people who probably had never heard his name. The doctor's emphatic words were clearly stamped in Gordon's mind.

"Dan Gordon, the only way out is for you to forget everything."

Silver streams flashed their brightness in his eyes as the train sped on; meadows and level fields appeared with patches of green and, here and there, a tree lifting its opening buds as a sweet-smelling offering to spring; ploughboys, turning up rich brown furrows; clusters of roofs about a church spire; rivers, spreading themselves out in the sunlight, and again, long stretches of woods with not a sign of habitation.

He raised the window, half expecting to encounter a puff of sooty smoke from the engine, which was working for all its might now that it had left the level country and begun its

long, arduous ascent to the very heart of the mountain; but, instead, the fresh aroma of woods and fields came floating to him in quick, warm breaths.

Toward four o'clock they reached the foothills, and by sunset the loftier peaks of the mountains began to lift themselves into view. Purple and somber, they loomed majestically against a background of flaming sky. Another hour and darkness had blotted them from sight, and the monotonous, snail-like movement of the train was the only reminder that they were there to be surmounted.

The car was dark and almost deserted when the brakeman appeared with his torch and lighted the lamps. They sent out a dim, uncertain flicker which made reading impossible. But Gordon did not have much farther to go; at most, less than fifty miles, not much in comparison to the distance he had already traveled.

The train stopped, and, pressing his face to the window, he made out a small wooden building with not a single individual characteristic to distinguish it from the fifty or more other little stations they had passed along the way. The brakemen waved their lanterns. The next station was his. If an ocean had rolled between him and home, he could not, he thought, have felt any more widely separated from it than he did now, or any farther distanced from Clarice had the lotus plant already breathed its magic perfume about him and by its potency taken him captive.

The brakeman's stentorian voice, announcing his destination, brought Gordon to his feet. The next minute he stood on a narrow strip of platform in what seemed to him to be a vast sea of mist and darkness, watching the vanishing light of his train.

V

One morning in June, Peter Piper ran panting down the trail to the white house in the fir trees, holding carefully between thumb and finger a slender stalk that drooped with a big, luscious berry, the first strawberry of the season.

"Look, Miss Mary," he called when he heard the familiar sound of her garden tools.

His hand trembled from excitement as he held out his gift to her.

"It is far too beautiful to eat, Peter Piper," she said, accepting his offering, "but I am going to just the same," and, suiting the action to the word, she tilted back her head, and suspended the berry temptingly over her mouth, drawing in a long breath of anticipation, then nibbled the fruit slowly to the boy's great satisfaction.

"It's delicious," she announced, still holding the stem to her lips. "Fancy trying to describe to a person who had never eaten one the taste of the first strawberry. The first one always tastes the best just as the first violets always smell the sweetest."

The pucker that appeared between his eyebrows when he was perplexed deepened in his forehead.

"Well, Peter Piper, a penny for your thoughts," she laughed, dropping to her knees to resume her troweling.

"If I had to explain, Miss Mary," he began hesitatingly, "I should tell them that it's just like taking a little bite of spring."

She swung round and looked up quickly into his dark, serious face to which constant wondering had given a peculiar wistfulness of expression.

"Or like taking a sip from the brimming cup of the year, Piper," she added, and then, with a quick change of subject, "What do you say to our taking our books up to the cascade this morning and having your lessons there? I have the luncheon all packed. You know that you and I are just going to live out-of-doors every minute this summer."

"Oh, Miss Mary, how soon can we start?" he cried, his face alight.

"In a very few minutes," she answered, turning toward the house. "You wait here under the apple tree; it looks just like a June bride this morning, all white, and fragrant, and radiantly lovely. Oh, Peter, could anything be prettier than a sunlit yard in summer with an apple tree in bloom? You can imagine just how it all looks, can't you?"

He did not answer, but his comprehending smile made words unnecessary.

It was so long since she had gone to the woods on a picnic that she looked forward to this one with as great a thrill of anticipation as did the boy himself, whom from her kitchen window she could see frisking about the garden like a colt and expressing his happiness in clear, ringing tones from his flute.

After what seemed to Peter Piper an incredibly long time, she called to him that she was coming, and the next minute she stepped out of her door, as fresh as a newly sprung flower, in her blue gingham dress and wide, drooping hat with its wreath of pink roses. Under her arm was a pile of books, and she was carrying a generous-sized hamper, which she handed to the boy as they started across the fir grove.

An hour's climb brought them to a broad clearing, encircled by fir trees, beeches, mountain ash, and scattering clumps of spruces, whose acrid fragrance was borne to them by every

gust of wind. All along the trail Peter Piper had been on the lookout for every new sign of summer, his bare feet sensitive to fresh wonders, and his hands searching in all the old, familiar haunts to satisfy themselves that nothing was missing, but that everything was quite as it ought to be.

"Yes, Miss Mary, the orioles are back in this tree," he would announce with jubilation, or, "the same old squirrel holes are here," and again, "the very same jays, scolding as hard as ever. And, oh, Miss Mary, how do they all find their way back?"

"Something tells them; something, for want of a better name, they call instinct," she explained.

"But the violets and strawberries?" he questioned. "Do they want to come back, too?"

"Yes, I think so," she replied, and tried to tell him about the beautiful philosophy of a great poet of nature, whose faith it was "that every flower enjoys the air it breathes."

He listened with that intentness and sensitiveness of expression that sometimes made her wonder if his slim, dancing body might not be the dwelling of a poet's soul.

They stopped at the clearing for a few breaths, then struck off sharply to the left, for the cascade. Across their sun-flecked path sleek brown squirrels and an occasional rabbit scampered; overhead, robins and wood thrushes sang above the persistent tapping of woodpeckers and the noisy scolding of jays. Flashes of blue, flaming red, and dull orange skimmed through the green of interlacing branches; bright-hued butterflies winged past, and bees flew by, humming contentedly over their stores of sweetness. Racing down the hill was a lively brook, and in its brown, sparkling water darted agile minnows. The boy liked nothing better than to dip his hands into the cool water and let one of the little creatures slip between his slender fingers. But he could not afford to stay anywhere long! A strong wind at their backs pushed them

along so that they reached the end of the trail in less time than usual.

"We're here," called Peter Piper, sliding his feet along a thick carpet of green needles.

With a reckless swing of his basket, he bounded away from her, shouting back over his shoulder, "The cascade! Just hear it booming! It was never so noisy before!"

Nothing had ever been so beautiful, so radiant, so full of life before! Never had flowers been so fragrant or birds so tuneful! Never had the sky been so blue or the woods so green! She was just as eager as the boy, just as free and happy. She ran to catch up with him. It was a long time since she had seen Giant Cascade, and she had forgotten that it could roar so frightfully.

From a precipitous ledge, a torrent of feathery whiteness dropped to a cavernous gorge and into a huge basin, which the constant wearing of the water had hollowed out in the rock.

Following a narrow, slippery path, the woman and the boy picked their way down a steep declivity, catching hold of branches and the roots of trees to steady themselves, until they came to an immense, flat rock with the smoothness of a polished floor. The big cataract hurled its mist in their faces, drowned their voices by its mighty roar, and almost took their breath away as it rushed into the seething basin below. There was a still lower basin in which the water, the overflow of the big basin, was very nearly a transparent green, a cool, tranquil jade that was restful to the eyes.

For several minutes the woman stood still, her hand on the boy's shoulder. On all sides towered the sunlit hills, and down the long gorge, beyond the falls, silver streams glistened here and there amidst a profusion of verdant foliage.

"When we go back," she said, "I want to get two or three

of the little blue spruces at the top of the ledge. Did you bring your knife?"

He nodded; the next minute clutched her hand.

"What was that?" he asked sharply.

"A slender fir tree on the edge of the cliff lost its balance and pitched headlong down the falls. My, what a fast ride it's having! Let's climb back and go out to the clearing. I should like to stay right here, but I'm afraid that it would be too noisy a schoolroom, don't you?"

They had reached the spot near which the small blue spruces grew, some distance from the falls, when, with a quick catch of her breath, she leaned forward and grasped the arm of Peter Piper, who was trudging ahead with his flute.

"Peter," she whispered, "there's someone lying on those slippery rocks right near the edge of the cliff. It's a man! Whatever do you suppose possessed him to go out there?"

"What are you going to do about it?" inquired the boy in a tone that suggested his confidence in her ability to meet any emergency.

"I'm going to see to it that he doesn't fall off," was her practical answer. "It's the only thing we can do."

They tiptoed cautiously up to where the man lay. The boy's foot caught in a dry, twisted root.

"Hush," she warned, "we mustn't startle him."

"Aren't you going to wake him up? We mustn't leave him here."

"Yes, we'll have to wake him," and then, on second thought, "no, why not let him have his nap out? He's the tiredest looking person, Peter Piper, I've ever seen. But the wind and the sunlight will do wonders for him. It really would be a pity to spoil his sleep, don't you think so?"

"Who do you suppose he is?" he asked, on tiptoe with curiosity.

She put her fingers to the boy's lips as the sleeper stirred uneasily.

"But what are we going to do?" he spelled out on his fingers.

She sat down on the broad, flat part of the ledge, within reaching distance of the man, and drew the boy down beside her. There, with scarcely a movement, for fear they might awaken him, they waited until Peter Piper, pointing to the hamper beside him, indicated that it was nearing dinner time.

"We shan't have to stay here much longer," she whispered, bending close to his ear. "Why, Peter Piper, he can't have slept for a year."

When an hour had gone by, the boy showed vigorous signs of restlessness, working his legs back and forth on the slippery moss that clung to the rock where he was sitting, and nervously fingering his flute.

Her quickly improvised games held him for a time—guessing games, the answers to which he would give in ecstatic whispers, and their favorite "Hide and Seek," which was effected without either of them stirring a step.

"Where am I now, Piper?" she would ask in a tone of voice that defied his ever finding her out, and he, nothing daunted, would hazard all kinds of rash conjectures, until by some sudden turn he discovered her inside the tall birch tree that leaned recklessly over the cliff; then, not to be outdone by her, he would conceal himself in the hollow of the big basin and, although the churning water was pouring over him, never make a single spluttering sound, until her keen eyes penetrated the depths of the pool and found him there. It was lots of fun playing the game, but stiff, aching limbs can't be disregarded forever. One must, after a while, give heed to them.

"I'm asleep, all but my head, Miss Mary."

She laughed, a low, silvery laugh that Peter Piper had once

solemnly told her sounded like the tinkling of water in the stone basin of her garden fountain.

"This is a queer holiday," she said, wriggling her feet and straightening out her arms. "Get up and take a run, why don't you? There's no need of our both staying here."

"You are talking," he cautioned.

"I know it; I am really of the opinion, Peter Piper, that nothing could wake him up."

"Maybe he's a prince and under a magic spell."

"In such case we may have to stay here forever," she exclaimed, thrusting out her hands in a little gesture of dismay.

"But there's always a princess—"

"Then you run along; you may meet her. Take a sandwich for yourself and one for her. She might be hungry."

He needed no further encouragement, and got to his feet as quickly as his stiff legs would permit him.

"I'll go out to the road and up to the field and see if I can find some strawberries."

"You are sure that you know the way?"

"Just as well as if I could see it, Miss Mary," he answered quickly. "If I don't meet the princess pretty soon, I shall eat her sandwich. I'll be back before long."

It was only when she was concerned for his safety that she ever alluded to his blindness. Always they pretended that he could see and, sometimes, it almost seemed to her that he did. His gay confidence reassured her, as he waved her a good-by, and she dismissed all anxiety from her mind. His run up to the strawberry patch would do him good, and he had said that he would come back soon.

Noon came, however, without bringing Peter Piper, and the man beside her was sleeping soundly. She was cramped and tired, but she dared not leave him, even for a few seconds, in such a precarious position. She had brought with her some

new books which Dr. Carruth had loaned her, and she tried to read, but found it difficult to keep her eyes away from the mountains, which every minute were growing more beautiful with scintillating lights, and shadows. Now and then she glanced at the sleeper. She had no doubt that he was the stranger of whom Uncle Gabriel had spoken to her with so much interest, for he answered to every detail of the old man's description. She wondered about him in a vague way—why he had come to the mountains, what had made him look so unnaturally tired, and what he would say when he awoke and found her there. She knew instinctively that he was different from anyone that had ever come there before; he was the kind of man she had dreamed of Peter Piper's some day knowing. How singular that they should discover him like this! Her mind again became full of anxious thoughts for the boy. He was so sure of himself, but if ever he should lose his way! She resolutely banished the troublesome idea from her mind and gave up looking for him, and, as soon as she did, she heard his joyful flute, announcing his approach. It was some time before he put in his appearance, but, when he did, it was not difficult to guess what had detained him. His lips and fingers were strawberry stained; his sunburned arms, filled with wild roses and swamp pinks. He was all animation until she told him that the magic spell that held the prince had not yet snapped.

"I guess he is a prince, all right!"

"That is exactly what I was thinking," she agreed thoughtfully, "and that he looks as if he might have lost his kingdom. You run up the bank, Piper, and play very softly on your flute—oh, let me see," she mused, "play the 'Spring Song.'"

The sweet notes were as clear and sparkling as dewdrops on the grass. The woman listened, but her whole attention was fixed on the man beside her. Suddenly he stirred and shot out an arm convulsively. With a quick motion, she threw

her own over it and gripped him tightly. At this, he slowly opened his eyes and looked up with frank bewilderment into the anxious face bending over him. She did not release her hold or make any explanation beyond that of nodding toward the precipice, not far from the very rim of which he had been sleeping. Raising himself on his elbow, he gazed steadily down into the cavernous depths from which, it intuitively dawned upon him, she had saved him.

"I wonder just how you happened to be here," he said, his eyes coming back to her face.

"We were on our way up from the basin and saw you here," she answered directly, withdrawing her hand from his arm.

"If you hadn't acted very quickly just then—"

She shivered and put her hand to her eyes.

"Don't speak of it, please," she implored. "The minute before, I was looking the other way. Supposing I had been, when you moved? Why did you take such a chance?"

"I went down to see the basin, too," he said, "and on the way back, lay down on the broad, flat rock where you are sitting. I hadn't any intention of taking a nap. Somehow, I must have rolled out to the edge. About how long have I been asleep, do you suppose?" he asked, getting stiffly to his feet.

"Almost three hours, I should say, perhaps longer. I don't know how long you had been here when we discovered you."

"But you haven't been sitting here all that time, have you?" he asked incredulously, stooping to help her rise.

"About three hours, I think," she answered as simply as if sitting on the ground three hours in order to let a person have his nap out, and saving a man from destruction were everyday occurrences with her or, at least, matters for no special comment.

"But why didn't you wake me up? You must be exhausted, and I—why, I haven't even thanked you."

There was a frank boyishness of manner in his speech, and even in his gesture, as he bent his level gaze upon her.

"It was only that you looked very tired," she replied. "One day I took a long nap out-of-doors. I think it saved my life."

He gave her a quick, comprehending look which made her feel that they were no longer strangers.

"Come," she said, "let's go up the trail. Somebody has run on ahead and is waiting for us. Somebody who thinks that you are a prince under a magic spell."

"I don't wonder. A sleep like that! It will be too bad to disillusion somebody. I prefer, when I can, to let people keep their dreams."

She liked him for that.

"Let's let him think that you are a prince, then."

His answer, an exact repetition of what she had said to the piper, somewhat startled her.

"If a prince, then one that has lost his kingdom."

There was nothing personal in his tone, but it drew her eyes up to his face.

"I shall always remember your staying by like that," he said, his grave smile bent upon her.

"You were more tired than I had ever seen anyone look before. I had a book to read and the hills to look at. I haven't had a chance to sit quiet and watch the hills for ages and ages!"

Behind her simple words there seemed to be an endlessness of time and space.

"I think that I must have fallen asleep," he explained, "trying to make out whether that object over there on the top of the mountain were a person or a tree. Do you see it? But I suppose that you have seen it a hundred times."

"Yes; it's a tree, a giant oak, the biggest anywhere around here. Sometimes in winter, it looks just like a person, standing on the frozen ridge. Years and years ago they say that people

used to believe that the tree was a forest king and that once a year he stalked down the mountain."

"He wasn't supposed to play a flute, was he? Evenings I swear I hear the pipes of Pan, startling old echoes among the hills."

"The pipes of Peter," she corrected, pointing to a big rock ahead of them where the boy had perched himself, anticipating her approach and that of the man, who, at last, through the magic of the flute, had been brought to life. "I am sure that he is almost starved, even if he has just come from a raid on the strawberry pasture."

"I don't wonder. You have both waited a long time. What you did for me hasn't been out of my mind a minute; I shall never forget."

"I know," she said smiling as their eyes suddenly met. "And here's the piper. Here we are," she called, holding out her hand.

The boy gripped her fingers, slid down from the rock onto a bank of slippery pine needles, and pulled himself nimbly to his feet.

"This is Peter Piper," she said, drawing the slender, dark-eyed boy toward her.

"To whom I am much indebted for bringing me to life with his music," responded the man, taking the boy's hand in his. "I've had you mixed up in my mind with Pan; now I'm glad to know who the piper really is."

"We didn't think that you were ever going to wake up. Just see what we have here. I got it ready while I was waiting for you."

On the top of a low, flat rock, by the side of a dashing brook, Peter Piper had spread the snow-white cloth that she had laid over the luncheon, and on it he had placed the goodies with painstaking care.

"Tarts," he exclaimed, "rolls, new doughnuts with sugar

on top, everything! I'll get a pail of water from the spring and then we're ready. Aren't you hungry, Mr. Prince? I always am after a nap; only I don't take one very often."

"Yes, I am, ravenously hungry, Peter Piper."

"That means as hungry as a wolf, doesn't it?"

"As hungry as a whole pack of them."

"There's enough for three," hinted the boy, setting off for the spring.

"Three wolves?"

"Maybe."

The woman's gracious smile of welcome seconded the boy's off-hand invitation.

"Yes, stay," she urged, "won't you? We should both like it so much."

"There's nothing I should like better," he said, following her down a little path to the rock where the luncheon was spread.

They ate to the noisy music of the cascade, only a short distance away. Peter Piper, who could not keep quiet longer than five minutes at a time, busied himself by filling and refilling their tin cups with water from the spring.

When they had packed the dishes away and thrown the crumbs to the birds, they climbed farther up the trail to another clearing, enclosed by blue spruces and pines.

"This will be a good place for the lessons," she said, stopping in the steep path to get her breath.

The man, whom Peter Piper had urged to stay with them when he discovered that he, too, had brought some books along, went on a little farther, but not so far as to lose them from sight or hearing. He had been easily persuaded to stay, for he had become intensely interested in them both, so unlike any other people he had met on the mountains, so unlike, in fact, any other people he had ever known. He threw himself onto the ground and picked up one of his books, but, after a

few minutes, dropped it to listen to the low hum of their voices.

His mind was full of questions about them. He did not doubt that there were other children at home. She would be sure to have them—a whole house full of little children. But if so, how could she devote a whole day to this blind boy of hers, so like herself?

Until now, Gordon had not realized how beautiful she was, perhaps, because hers was no ordinary beauty, but rather the fresh radiance of the hills in which there was a mingling of quietness and strength and peace. Her hair with its gleaming copper points, which the sunlight struck into fire, was drawn smoothly back from her forehead and gathered at the back of her neck into a loose knot; her eyes were one minute serious; the next, glowing as if behind their lustrous depths there burned a steady light, which might for the instant grow dim, but which was always ready at the slightest provocation to spring to flame. If there were such a thing as reincarnation, he was sure that in some previous existence she must have been a spirit of the woods, who had drawn the sunlight and the shadows of the hills into her eyes; the clear, low music of mountain streams, and the quietness of summer rains into her voice; and into herself the immeasurable distance of the stars. He might be all wrong in his conjectures, but one could hardly look at her, it seemed to him, and think otherwise.

In her eyes, indeed, there were both depth and distance, and for all the warmth and nearness of her personality, there was about her a quality of remoteness that made him plainly conscious of a space between them which it was impossible for him to bridge. He wondered if others recognized that quality in her or if it was a characteristic which his fancy ascribed to her. He could easily imagine her doing her daily round of work, her eyes on distant hilltops; mingling with her friends and neighbors, with them and yet apart.

Peter Piper had flattened himself on the ground and was listening, his head propped up by his arms, to the story she was reading. The man went nearer to hear it, for something in it had suddenly caught his attention.

"And Bellerophon put his faith in the child, who had seen the image of Pegasus in the water, and in the maiden, who had heard him neigh so melodiously, rather than in the middle-aged clown, who believed only in cart-horses, or in the old man, who had forgotten the beautiful things of his youth.

"Therefore, he haunted the Fountain of Pirene for a great many days afterwards. . . . The rustic people who dwelt in the neighborhood, and drove their cattle to the fountain to drink would often laugh at poor Bellerophon, and sometimes take him pretty severely to task. They told him that an able-bodied young man, like himself, ought to have better business than to be wasting his time in such an idle pursuit. They offered to sell him a horse if he wanted one; and when Bellerophon declined the purchasing, they tried to drive a bargain with him for his fine bridle. . . . It pained him, too, to think how much mischief the monster was doing, while he himself, instead of fighting with it, was compelled to sit idly by, poring over the bright waters of Pirene, as they gushed out of the sparkling sand. And as Pegasus came thither seldom in those latter years, and scarcely alighted more than once in a life-time, Bellerophon feared that he might grow to be an old man, and have no strength left in his arms, no courage in his heart before the winged horse would appear. . . . How hard a lesson it is to wait! for life is brief, and how much of it is spent in teaching us only this! . . .

"And at length, if it had not been for a little boy's unwavering faith, Bellerophon would have given up all hope, and would have gone back to Lycia and have done his best to slay the Chimæra without the help of the winged horse. And in that case poor Bellerophon would at least have been terribly

scorched by the creature's breath, and would most probably have been killed and devoured. Nobody should ever try to fight an earth-born Chimæra unless he can first get upon the back of an aerial steed. . . .

"And when Bellerophon had won the victory, he bent forward and kissed Pegasus, while the tears stood in his eyes. . . .

"'Where is the gentle child?' asked Bellerophon, 'who used to keep me company, and never lost his faith, and never was weary of gazing into the fountain?'

"'Here I am, dear Bellerophon!' said the child softly.

"For the little boy had spent day after day on the margin of Pirene, waiting for his friend to come back; but when he perceived Bellerophon descending through the clouds, mounted on the winged horse, he shrunk back into the shrubbery. . . .

"'Thou hast won the victory!' said he joyfully, running to the knee of Bellerophon, who still sat on the back of Pegasus. 'I knew thou woulds't.'

"'Yes, dear child!' replied Bellerophon, alighting from the winged horse. 'But if thy faith had not helped me, I should not have waited for Pegasus, and never have gone up above the clouds, and never have conquered the terrible Chimæra.'

"But in after years that child took higher flights upon the aerial steed than even did Bellerophon and achieved more honorable deeds than his friend's victory over the Chimæra for, gentle and tender as he was, he grew to be a mighty poet!"

• • • • •
They started down the trail at sunset, the boy leading the way with his flute.

"I don't know when I have had such a good day," said the man thoughtfully.

"You do look rested."

"And you, too, after your long vigil."

She had hoped that he wasn't going to refer again to that part of their day, and yet she had been sure that he would.

"I am glad that we found you. I have wanted the piper to know someone like you—for a long time," she remarked with surprising frankness.

He was puzzled as to just what she meant by that, but he refrained from asking her.

The sun had dipped out of sight, the crimson clouds melted into gray, and the evening star appeared over the brow of the mountain when they came to the end of the trail. Peter Piper had run on ahead, piping all the way, stopping only now and then to see if they were far behind.

"One would never take him to be blind," remarked the man. "You say that he likes to go on long tramps by himself. Aren't you ever afraid of his getting lost?"

She shook her head.

"No, not often; he knows the mountain like a book; you could drop him anywhere on it and I believe he could find his way home. I have often thought of a story I read a long time ago. It was about a blind woman who didn't appear to know that she was blind. No one else knew it either. The idea seemed ridiculous at first, but now I'm not so sure that it was impossible. Do you think that there could have been any truth in it?"

His answer was not very satisfactory since it was only a repetition of her own thought.

"I wonder," he said seriously.

There was a long silence between them before she added, "And sometimes I am puzzled over what his world is like."

"Whatever it is, it is very real to him. Anyone watching him a few minutes could have no doubt of that, and he is so alive and happy, isn't he? I have never seen anyone happier than he."

He was glad that he could give her at least that much assurance, for he knew both from her eyes and her voice that she was gravely troubled, and that she had expressed her feelings least emphatically when she had said that she was puzzled.

Presently they were at the clump of fir trees, and then at her garden, which exhaled a delicate fragrance of shrubs and flowers. She stood with her hand on the gate while Peter Piper asked the question that was in her mind.

"Some day you will come again?"

The reply was spontaneous and the man gave it with his eyes on her house, from which he half expected to see at any minute a number of little children rush out to meet their mother.

"Yes, Piper, I want to come again. I am living at a farmhouse half a mile or more from here. You probably know the Clarks. In a week or two I'm going to move into a shack that they are building out in their woods. Anytime I hear the pipes of Pan," turning to the boy, "my feet will follow them. Until now it has been somewhat lonely here."

At his words, her eyes, which had become somber, sprang to a glad light that shone long after she had started Peter Piper on his way home, and gone into the quiet darkness of her house.

VI

When, years afterward, Daniel Gordon looked back over his first few weeks in the mountains, there were several events that stood out in his memory startlingly clear and unforgettable. Among them was an evening in late June—it was an event when contrasted with the colorless evenings he had heretofore passed in the barren farmhouse room that harbored him and the few possessions, mostly books, he had brought with him. He found the long, bright days of early summer full of a new kind of pleasure, but the quiet evenings, when the big, rambling house became still at what seemed to him to be a remarkably early hour, gave him more time than he wanted to himself.

On one of these evenings he abandoned his books and started off for a tramp. The day had been excessively hot and it was little cooler now except for an occasional breeze. This was unusual, for no matter how oppressive the days, the nights were ordinarily chilly. At a notch in the hills, where two roads diverged from each other, he hesitated, uncertain which to take. The road to the right was grass-grown, scarcely more than a wide path, and had about it all the charm of the untraveled; the other, he knew, led, by devious windings and turnings, to the post office. There surely was nothing to draw him there. Down the grass-grown road a hermit thrush was singing, the first he had heard in years, and, with something of the spirit of adventure, he followed in the direction of the lilting song.

The hills darkened, and a few pale stars twinkled feebly in the sultry haze that overhung their summits and permeated the atmosphere of the night. The song became fainter, coming from a long way off, and at last melted into the deepening shadows of the woods. He was about to turn back, when, rounding an unexpected bend in the road, he saw, shining through a clump of fir trees, the light of a house. He was surprised and a little bewildered by a sudden sense of familiarity with his surroundings. A few steps farther and he was at the white gate that opened to the old-fashioned garden and the low, white house in which lived the piper and his mother. What a strange coincidence that the unpromising, old cart-wheel road should have led him here!

Someone in the house was playing, and he sat down on the bench under the cherry tree to listen. The door was open and through the low, wide doorway he could look into the room where a woman—"the woman of the hills" he called her because he did not know her name—sat at a three-cornered piano, her eyes bent on the keys except when she raised them, now and then, to the slender boy standing beside her with his flute. He recognized the composition she was playing since it had been one of their favorites at home, Beethoven's Sonata in C sharp minor, the inimitable "Moonlight Sonata," the sublimity of which he had not realized until now. Heretofore, it had been only a brilliant piece of music, which appealed to him more for associations connected with it than for any beauty of its own; but now, in her hands, it had become a living, palpitating thing, a breathing reality, something to evoke old dreams and thrill him with ecstasy. With careful precision he followed the three movements, adagio sostenuto, allegretto, presto agitato. He remembered the names from having turned the leaves for someone to play.

There was no time for him to try to settle the baffling questions concerning the player that came thronging into his

mind. He only realized with something of a sensation of defeat that all his preconceived notions about her were wrong.

"Now let's have our game." It was the clear voice of the piper.

Low chords, cello-like in their depth and warmth of tone, swift, graceful runs, sweeping crescendos, and clear, sustained notes, brilliant as the winter stars, followed one another in quick succession.

Leaving the cherry tree, Gordon walked up the garden path to the door.

"I saw it all," the boy exclaimed, "the wind in the trees, rocking the birds to rest, their drowsy twitters, and the croaking—you meant the low, growly notes to be the frogs, didn't you?—and the stars, hanging out their tiny lanterns, and the brooks singing the hills to sleep."

"Yes, I meant it all that way," she answered, smiling gravely. "You are quick to see. Now I am going to find out how well you remember," turning around to reach for a pile of music on the shelf behind her. "You tell me the names of these as I play them, if you can."

She began with snatches from "Robin Hood" and "Wilhelm Tell," and finished with a composition with which Gordon was unfamiliar, but for which the boy seemed to have invented a tale of wonder all his own.

"I like the story about Robin Hood and his merry men in the greenwood best of all," he told her.

"It is very romantic but, oh, Peter Piper, some time I want you to hear a big orchestra play the overture to 'Wilhelm Tell.' You won't be able to stay in your seat for excitement."

"I hope I don't have to wait very long."

"Now, then," she said, handing him his flute, which he had laid on the piano, "it's your turn, Piper."

She struck the opening chord, and the boy with a nod laid the flute to his lips. It was the "Berceuse from Jocelyn" to which he played a clear, unfaltering obbligato.

"That means good-night, doesn't it?" he asked when they had finished.

"I suppose that it does," she replied slowly. "We've had a good time, haven't we? Let's go out into the garden for a breath of air. The piping has made you warm as warm can be. We'll wait for a cooler night before trying it again."

Reluctantly Gordon got to his feet from the steps where he had been sitting. His hour of pleasure had not been without its disappointment. The woman of the quiet brows and lighted eyes was not the simple hill-woman he had supposed her to be, but an artist of unusual ability, who had probably come to the mountains for rest or special work. Her improvising had been rich with color, throbbing with warmth and beauty; it had drawn within her house a forest full of singing birds, the sounds of dusky country roads and twilight fields, and had created, for eyes that could not see, the radiant light of illimitable dawns. What a world she had fashioned for the boy!

Gordon had not seen her since the day of their picnic, more than three weeks ago, and he had asked no questions concerning her. But he had thought of her gratefully many times, and of her boy, the piper. Although the unusual way in which they had met had made their brief acquaintance of more than common moment, he had been content not to try to penetrate the aura of mystery in which she seemed to him to move.

To-night, however, had quite disillusioned him concerning her. Even so, he could not think of her but as a tender mother, who had spent her days, some few of them, at least, mending broken toys and broken hearts, and at whose knees little children had been taught to pray. But he was done with conjectures. Jumping at conclusions, Clarice would have called it.

Before he went, he heard the piper say, "He promised to come back and he never has."

"You mean the prince?"

"I suppose that he really isn't a prince, is he?"

"No; he told me that his name is Gordon and that he is here for a long vacation."

"I thought that he would keep his promise."

"Do you want him to come?" she asked seriously.

"Yes."

"How much?"

"I have looked for him every day and night."

Something in the boy's voice arrested Gordon's attention and brought him to a standstill in the garden path.

"You will have to play your flute; he said that he would follow the pipes of Pan. Perhaps he is waiting to hear them," the woman said.

"Oh, do you think so?" eagerly.

"I shouldn't wonder. He wouldn't tell you a lie; he wouldn't say he was coming and then not come."

"How do you know? Did he tell you?"

At that she laughed. "No, he didn't tell me, Piper. Some things we know without our ever being told."

"Do you want him to come, too?"

"Yes, I have watched for him every day and night," she answered gravely, moving towards the door.

"Then we shan't either of us have to wait any longer, for to-night I shall play under his window."

Gordon was lost in the shadows of the fir grove when the woman and the boy came out onto the piazza. He had not meant to hear so much, but something—surprise, disappointment, wonder—he was not sure which—had held him there.

He found the road,—he would not trust himself to the circuitous path by which he had come—and went home with the hope of hearing at some not too distant hour the beckoning pipes of Pan.

VII

It was on a rainy evening a week later that Gordon stopped in the post office to read a brief letter that the night mail had brought him from Clarice. It was the first he had received from her in all the weeks he had been gone from home, consequently he took it from the postmaster's hand with something of surprise and doubtful anticipation. He had, at first, rather expected that she would write. When she didn't, he came, after a little, to accept her silence as a matter of course, and to wonder at his lack of disappointment.

"The Arley-Robinsons," she wrote in her big, easy hand, "are perfect hosts and we are having a wonderful time but there hasn't been anything worth writing about, at least nothing that you would be especially interested in."

There followed a few characteristic remarks about different members of the party, after which she came to the real point of the letter, a somewhat peremptory demand for a substantial check to settle a rather startling bill which she had run up at bridge.

The conclusion was brief. "Just before I left," she wrote, "I came face to face with Mr. Howard down town. He didn't recognize me. Just as if I were to blame because I happen to be your wife. He has grown very old. I suppose that in a way you can't blame him for feeling the way he does toward you. They say that Dr. Digby is going to make no end of changes at the hospital. I heard that they were going to sell some of the land near the river for building-lots, but it may be

only talk. I must dress for dinner. Good-by, Dan, and don't forget about the check."

Gordon felt the blood leave his face as her carelessly written words stabbed him afresh and blotted into obscurity every other thought in his mind. Mechanically he smoothed out the letter, which he had crumpled between his hands. At the bottom of the page was a cross, the kiss which she flippantly tossed to him across the widening distance.

Longer than he realized he stood, empty of thought, leaning against the counter, which sheltered under its fly-specked glass a conglomerate mixture of highly perfumed soaps, and bright-colored candy, together with a general assortment of collar buttons, hairpins, shoestrings, and other miscellaneous articles, all lying in friendly proximity and catalogued under the indefinite name of "notions."

"Not bad news, is it?" inquired the old postmaster, peering over the narrow rims of his silver spectacles.

"No, not bad news," replied Gordon, dropping the letter into his pocket.

"Well, I'm glad of that. You looked kind of knocked out for the minute. Thought maybe someone was sick. I always hate to pass any bad news through the slide. You go past the Malvern place, don't you, on your way home?"

Gordon, who only a few days previous had learned the name of the mountain-woman, said that he did.

"Then, would you mind stopping with Mary Malvern's mail? It's pretty wet out for the womenfolks but she'll come down. She never stays in for the weather. I've got an errand to do for Mother, and so have to go home another way. Course, if it's any trouble to you—"

"But it isn't," Gordon assured him, reaching for the paper and the letter that the postmaster was holding uncertainly toward him. "I'll hurry right along so as to get there before she starts out. The storm seems to be increasing."

"Looks to me," predicted the old man, hobbling across the uneven floor to a small, narrow-paned window, which, in its dinginess, afforded a rather dismal view of Sunrise Mountain, "Looks to me as if we was in for a regular tempest. Well, a little rain won't do the gardens a mite of harm. Mine is as dry as an Egyptian mummy. That cloud looks as if it was going to turn inside out and let down a regular squall that'll tear the seeds right out of the ground. You had best hurry, I guess."

It was precisely what Gordon intended to do, but before he was down the steps, he was summoned back with a peremptory, "Wait just a minute, Mr. Gordon."

When Gordon reentered the store, its proprietor was nowhere in evidence, but presently he emerged from behind the counter of miscellanies with a bulging paper bag, which he thrust into Gordon's overcoat pocket.

"Long as you're stopping there, I thought I would send Mary's boy a bit of candy. He'll enjoy it a rainy night like this. Did you ever hear him play his flute? Makes me pretty near forget I'm stiff with the rheumatiz when I hear him piping in the hills. I tell Mother that it sets my Unitarian feet to tingling, but she don't encourage me in that; we were both brought up pretty strict, you know. Well, you'd best hurry along," he admonished with another dubious glance at the low, black cloud, which had assumed rather threatening proportions over Sunrise Mountain. "You won't have more than time to make the Malvern place."

Mary Malvern's house was a little out of Gordon's way, for she lived on a side road, which branched off from the main about a mile beyond the post office. But he was glad to do the errand, and it was with a throb of pleasure that he looked forward to seeing her and the boy again.

He could scarcely make out the road before him as he strode up the hill, his head thrust forward against the wind,

his hands deep in his overcoat pockets, in one of which lay his letter and Mary Malvern's paper; and in the other, the bulky paper bag for the piper. With woods on both sides of him and only one or two houses along the way, he more than once came near getting off the road. It was the first storm he had experienced on the mountain, and he felt with a keen sense of enjoyment the big drops, splashing on his face, and the oozy give of the dank earth beneath his feet.

He recognized the broad meadows that lay between the woods and her house by the pungent odors which steamed from the freshly mowed grass and flowers. Fortunately, he had not much farther to go, for the postmaster's prediction bade fair to be fulfilled in generous measure. There was a sharp flash of lightning followed by an ominous growl that reverberated in the hills. Suddenly the clouds to all appearances turned themselves inside out and "let out" a squall compared to which the former downpour seemed little more than a lively drizzle.

Gordon pulled down his felt hat, around the brim of which the water was running in streams that trickled down his face to his overcoat collar, which he held tightly about his neck. Where it had been dark, it was now inky black; the trees and bushes, slapping against him, impeded his progress, and he had about made up his mind that he had taken the wrong turn at the fork, when, as he turned a bend in the road, long, slanting, wavering lines of light from her house relieved him of his doubt. He followed them to the edge of the fir grove, and through it to the garden, whose drenched sweetness distilled itself upon the heavy air. Between long rows of limp, sagging flowers, he made his way up the garden path to her house.

At his knock, she came at once to the door, which, as soon as she lifted the latch, the wind swung wide open, letting in a rush of driving rain.

"Mr. Gordon!" she exclaimed as he entered the house and pushed the door to firmly.

"I believe I had better go out on the porch and wait until the storm is over," he said, glancing ruefully down at the little, broadening puddle of water that had descended from his hat to her polished floor. "I look like someone who has barely escaped drowning, and the paper, too," he added, drawing the water-soaked sheet from his pocket. "You will have a hard time reading it, I'm afraid."

"That won't make any difference and you're not going to wait on the porch," she answered gently but decisively, taking the offending hat from his hand. "Let me have your overcoat, too. Why, you're almost drenched. But see what a crackling fire the piper has built for me! You had better turn round in front of it until you are thoroughly dry."

Her voice was as cheerful as her fire, and her eyes were very full of light and welcome.

"The postmaster advised me to hurry," he said.

"And, then, I imagine that he kept adding one word more. We all know Uncle Gabriel."

"Anyway, I'm glad to find out at last what one of his squalls is like. He hasn't exaggerated any, which, I imagine, is a little unusual for him, isn't it?"

They both laughed in recollection of the old man, as Gordon followed her into a long, low room, lighted with the mingled radiance of the leaping fire and the mellow glow of her tall, yellow-shaded lamp.

Having deposited his hat and coat in the kitchen, she came back to the fire before which, according to her injunction, he was slowly turning round and round very like, he told her, a roast of meat on a spit. With the tongs and bellows, she coaxed the fire to a still brighter blaze, and pulled a low rocker up to it.

"If you will excuse me," she said, sitting down, "I am going

on with my mending. It is quite necessary that Peter Piper have these in the morning. He has looked for you every day."

"Has he? But I know that he has."

She glanced up inquiringly as she picked up a boy's jacket from the low table beside her, on which lay her workbasket and a neat little pile of clothes.

"I heard his flute one night, and should have followed the pipes if something hadn't happened to prevent," he said as she threaded her needle and began to sew a square, even patch on the boy's coat sleeve.

As she bent seriously over her work, which, he imagined, from the raggedness of the tear, required skill and ingenuity to perform, Gordon glanced about the room that had at once impressed him with its grace and comfort. It was just what he would have expected a room of hers to be—like her, distinctive in its simplicity. The sheer white draperies at the narrow-paned windows, at one of which hung a gilt cage, enclosing a little, yellow, quivering bundle of feathers; the low bookcases, their blue baize curtains drawn aside, disclosing well-filled shelves; the three or four copies of old paintings on the blue walls; and the three-cornered piano, on which stood a bowl of spicy moss roses, were all details the loveliness of which was enhanced by the leaping flame of the fire, which pervaded the most remote corners of the long room.

In her garnet dress with its bit of lace at neck and sleeves, her eyes tenderly glowing over their work, the woman, sewing in her low rocker, added the final touch of warmth and color without which her room would have seemed incomplete.

Gordon was acutely aware of a feeling of friendliness for the closed door, which shut the whole world out and gave him this hour with her.

The wind was driving the rain in great sheets against the windows, and striking the branches of a tree against her house.

"This is a wild storm," she remarked, looking up from her sewing. "I am glad that you came just when you did. You might otherwise have been lost on the mountain."

As he watched her flashing needle, his mind became confused with thoughts of the C sharp minor Sonata. Try as he would, he could not reconcile the woman before him, all mother-eyes and mother-hands, with the woman he had seen at the piano only a few nights before.

"I don't believe this will be a long storm. To-morrow you will see the mountains at their best," she said, laying down the piper's jacket. "To-morrow morning they will be all colors of the rainbow; blues, and greens, and indigos, all dazzling lights, and shadows. The leaves will shine and there'll be a strong wind to blow them back and forth, and there'll be the fragrance of crushed flowers, and, oh—are your shoes drying?"

He smiled at the sudden turn in her thoughts from the sublime to the commonplace as being quite characteristic of her.

"You are always looking out for people, aren't you?" he asked.

"There are always people who need to be looked out for, aren't there?" was her brief reply.

The recollection of his perilous nap on the cliff had been in his mind when he spoke, and he knew from her next remark, although it was some time before she made it, that the same thought had been in hers.

"We haven't seen you since that day."

"But I have seen you and the boy."

She looked up inquiringly again as she drew her thread tighter and snapped it off.

"I sat out under the cherry tree the other night while you played to the piper."

"You did!"

"Yes, until the very end of the concert."

"But why didn't you come in?"

"I started out for a long walk, took an old, grass-grown road with big cart-wheel ruts. It brought me here. I stayed outside to think, and listen, and wonder a little. I even heard a little of the conversation. I've been wanting to tell you ever since. It seemed like eavesdropping, but I couldn't get away."

The wistful expression that crept at times unexpectedly into her eyes looked forth from them now in its intensity, but her lips did not move.

"I knew that I shouldn't feel right about it until I had told you, and now—"

She felt his compelling eyes searching her troubled face, and forced herself to composure.

"It was quite all right," she told him in a steady voice, "only next time you mustn't stay outside."

There seemed to be no end to her mending, for, the jacket finished and carefully folded, she drew from her basket a bright red cap, which he recognized as belonging to the boy, and began to sew a button on the top of it. And when that was done, she emptied into her lap a bag of stockings, full of yawning holes.

"Peter Piper tramps so much, you see," she explained, running her needle up and down, across and back, in long, firm stitches.

And still the wind hurled great avalanches of rain against the house as if bent upon breaking the windows and smashing in the door, while the fire snapped and crackled in its defiant warmth and brightness.

"I don't know as there will be anything left of my cherry tree," she remarked. "But the rain will stop just as suddenly as it began. Before long the stars will be shining."

He was in no hurry for the storm to be over. Now that he had discovered a little about her, he was eager to know the

rest, and he hoped that before the evening was over she would say something about herself. He expected every minute to see the piper appear. Certainly he could not be out in the storm or she would be uneasy about him.

"That's an interesting boy of yours, Mrs. Malvern," he said when she had been silent for some time.

From the quick lift of her eyebrows he was at once conscious of his mistake.

"I am not Mrs. Malvern," she corrected quietly.

"But the piper?" he asked.

"Did you think that he was my boy?" she inquired, leaving her stitch half drawn.

"I took it for granted that he was," he replied, overcome by something of the same sensation he had experienced in the garden on the night he had heard her play.

The little world that in his imagination he had built up around them, and that had begun to totter on its foundations several days ago, was now tumbled completely into ruins. It was not gratifying to be so mistaken.

Her quiet voice recalled him. "I wonder why you should have thought that he belonged to me?"

It was more like a meditation than a question, but, after a little, he found himself answering her.

"It must have been because he is so like you, I think and, then, everybody speaks of him as 'Mary's boy.' "

"That is because he has no parents, and because he has been so much with me. Do you think that he is very like me?" she asked, dropping a half-mended stocking from her hands, and leaning forward.

The passionate earnestness of her voice and eyes was like distress. It was quite clear to him that she wanted him to deny the boy's resemblance to her. Truthfully he could not do that.

"You do think that he is like me?" she repeated, searching his face for an answer to her question.

"Yes, I do, or, maybe, it would be nearer the truth to say that I did. It's just the usual thing, isn't it, to see or, at least, to imagine a resemblance between a child and its parent? And I thought that you were his mother."

"Yes, I suppose that it is," she answered slowly. "But the piper is like me only, you see, I had never heard anyone say so before. You weren't telling me anything new, but just confirming what I was so sure of but didn't like to acknowledge."

It was on his tongue to ask her why, but again he refrained from questioning her. He could but wonder, however, at her taking the matter so much to heart.

"We are likely to grow to be like the people we associate with," said Gordon, falling back on a platitude, in his desire to help her. "I should not let that trouble me."

"You don't understand, Mr. Gordon," she began, relieved that the way was open for her to tell him what was on her mind. "I don't want him to be like me, and if he is, I am responsible for it. If he thinks as I do, it is because I have directed his thoughts. You see, in a way, I have had the shaping of his world for him. I have pictured things to him just as I wanted him to see them, just as I saw them. And, now, how can I know that I have shown him right? Sometimes I am very sure that I have not."

"But you didn't represent things regardless of the truth," he put in.

"No," she reflected, "no, I have always kept in mind that nothing can be good and beautiful unless it is true. But I haven't always been accurate because," she confessed, "it is such an effort to be practical that I give up the attempt. From the first, it was a joy to find him so responsive. Then, before I saw what was happening, his own fancy was taking the lead and I was having hard work to keep up with him."

"Doesn't that just prove that you were only drawing out what was already in him, waiting to be developed?"

"Perhaps, but the piper is growing up now; I don't want him to be an idealist or a dreamer. It costs too much. I want him to be practical and get hold of the real things of life, not just shadows. Sometimes," she added, a touch of sadness in her voice, "I think that's all there is to the mountains, just shadows. The real things lie beyond."

"No," he contradicted passionately, "the real things aren't beyond. They are right here; I know."

"But you have only just come here."

"Yes, and I have been there all my life."

There was no sound in the room except the crackling of the fire. Their minds were both very full of their own thoughts.

At last, she took up the conversation, going back to the boy.

"And, now, he plays his flute and lives very happily and contentedly in his own beautiful world. When we found you, I knew at once that you belonged to that other world of real things that he doesn't know anything about. I want you to tell him. I want you to make him see!"

"See?" he repeated, not sure of what she was demanding of him.

"Yes, not things as they ought to be or might be, but things as they really are."

In her earnestness, she had leaned forward and touched the arm of his chair. "I have been waiting for you or someone like you to come. You must think that I am putting things clumsily, and not making them at all plain, but there's never been anyone before I could talk to like this about the piper."

"If I can help you," he responded, summoning himself to meet the challenge of her voice and eyes.

"It's because he is growing up that I am troubled about him. Every day it is getting harder to answer his questions, and he won't be put off. I am having to tell him more and more often that I don't know, and he doesn't understand

that. Naturally he believes that with seeing eyes I must know everything."

From the bright seriousness of her face, Gordon knew that the matter of which she was speaking was of the gravest concern to her. That she had dwelt upon it until it had assumed unreasonable proportions seemed to him to be very possible. Whether that were true or not, his one desire was to help her.

"It is a heavy responsibility to create a world for anybody," he agreed, when she had laid aside the last of her mending, "but, after all, you didn't do that. No two of us, they tell us, see things just alike, and if you overspread your world and his with a rosy glow, you are only using your right to paint it that way. You have only brought out what was already in the piper. What isn't in a person can never be developed. But I'm afraid that you don't see."

"Oh, but I do," she cried, her face lighting, as the reasonableness of his words was borne in upon her. "There isn't very much to tell about Peter Piper, because we know so little about him except that eight years ago, when he was about three years old, he was left in a clothes-basket on the steps of the house where he still lives. It has always been a mystery to the neighbors why his parents, or whoever it was that abandoned him, chose that ramshackle house that was already overflowing with children. One of the boys told Uncle Gabriel that some day wealthy people were coming from over distant seas to ransom Peter Piper and that then they would all be rich and move to California. They used to act as if they thought he was going to be spirited away from them like the children in fairy legends."

"Have they always lived here, these Skinners?"

"No; about a year before Peter Piper's mysterious arrival, they drifted over the mountain from nobody knows where. They made their appearance in a big canvas-top wagon that

Uncle Gabriel calls the 'prairie schooner.' There's a strain of poetry or a touch of romance in their make-up. We're not so sure but that they are gypsies. The mother is typically Spanish. The piper used to delight in rehearsing their names to me."

"They must be the children I saw going blueberrying the other day. I caught one or two rather original names. What are they?"

"The piper can do them better justice," she answered with a quiet laugh, "but here they ate: Seraphina, called Sarah for short, is the oldest. Then follow the twins, Quixote, and Celestial, who is the imp of the family and certainly can't lay any claim to relation with the angels. Lancelot comes next, then Hiram and Angelus, the baby. There were two older children who went away a year or so after their advent here, and they have never come back. Fortunately all their names could be shortened to good advantage, and no one would ever guess the original from their nicknames: Sarah, Quixie, Lester, Larrie, Hi, and Angie."

"Well, I should say there is a good bit of romance mixed up in those names," observed Gordon with an amused smile. "Plain Hiram must feel out of place among the angels, cavaliers, and knights. And Peter Piper, what about him?"

"The piper is a solitary figure among them. They seem to regard him with something of awe, and treat him as if he belonged to another sphere from theirs. It really is an unfortunate environment for him, but they give him enough to eat and are not unkind to him, so nobody can say anything."

"And they let him come to you as much as he likes?"

"Sometimes they try to keep him away; they seem to feel that I want him, and I do," she added after a second's pause.

"They have in mind the ransom that is coming from over distant seas, I suppose."

"Yes, I think so. Peter Piper ought to be associating with

boys his own age now," she went on, anxious to lay all her problem before him. "The Skinners sent him to school when he was six years old, but he was shy and sensitive, and the school was a prison to him. One day—I shall never forget it—he came running into the house, flung down his books and himself onto the floor. 'I hate school,' he cried. His small fists were clenched and he was trying bravely to hold back his tears. Ever since then I have taught him his lessons. At first he didn't want to learn, and he was a lonely little figure before he found that even with closed eyes he could see."

"You have gone a long way with the Piper," reflected Gordon seriously, "but there's no end to the road that you will travel with him."

Her eyes, when she raised them, were suffused with a warm, tender light.

"Did his interesting name come with him?" asked Gordon, desirous of hearing all he could about the boy.

"We have never known his real name," she answered. "When he was seven years old, I gave him a flute that my father used to play, and taught him what little I could. The next summer it happened that there was a young man boarding at Uncle Gabriel's who knew a great deal about the flute, and he helped Peter. I began to call him 'the piper' in fun and then, because he needed another name, 'Peter Piper.'"

"Do you suppose that he ever wonders who he really is?"

"It's only within the last year that he has asked any questions. Until then, he seemed to be perfectly contented with the story the Skinners told him, that he had been wafted over the sea in some mysterious way and left at their door. One winter evening we were sitting by the fire. I had been reading him one of the King Arthur legends, about his coming and all the dispute they had over his birth. I had come to Merlin's story of how Arthur had been washed up on the shore, a little, naked babe, when Peter Piper reached over and closed the

book on my lap. His eyes were full of indignant tears. ‘But all that is a lie,’ he cried. And then, for the first time, he asked me about himself.

“‘Then I don’t belong to anybody,’ he sobbed, when I had explained to him his mysterious coming to the Skinners, but I told him that he would always belong to me.”

“I thought that day at the cascade that you had always lived here in the hills and that the boy was yours. When I heard you play the other night, I realized that I had been mistaken about your belonging here, but it never occurred to me that Peter Piper might not be yours.”

“But you weren’t wrong about my belonging here,” she told him. “I have never lived anywhere but here.”

“And, yet, you play—like that!”

The warm color that had surged to her face receded, leaving her pale almost to whiteness. Conscious that her lips were trembling beyond control, she bent forward and pushed the smoldering birch logs into blaze. The fire points of her brook-brown hair glinted as she raised her head, but her eyes were dull and lifeless, and when she spoke, it was only to remark irrelevantly that the storm, she was afraid, was making havoc of her garden and the cherry tree.

It was very homelike, sitting with her by her fire that was a challenge to the wind and rain, and, for all it was only the second time that he had seen her, it seemed to him the most natural thing in the world to be there. He was in no hurry to go but, as Mary Malvern had prophesied, the storm ended as abruptly as it began, and presently there was no excuse for his staying longer.

“Sometime you’ll come again?” she asked eagerly, “sometime when Peter Piper is here. You don’t know how disappointed he is going to be to-morrow when I tell him that you have been here.”

“I want to come, and I’ve been thinking about what you

said. Do you suppose that the piper would be willing to pilot me around a bit?"

"Oh, he knows the mountain better than anyone else; he can take you anywhere," she cried, "and he'll be delighted to go. You can't understand how much I want him to know you."

"Then you want him to know someone who has been a failure," he told her. "I can't let you be under any delusion concerning me; you are too utterly frank yourself for that. I want to know the piper, but I may not be able to help him as much as you think. In justice to yourself, I have to tell you that much."

Impulsively she held out her hands to him.

"I can't be glad enough for him that you have come," she said, the flame leaping back to her eyes.

She brought him his coat and hat with the remark that the sky was as clear as a bell, and lighted him to the door, where she stood, lamp in hand, until she knew that he had crossed the big clump of fir trees and turned the first corner in the road.

The stars were shining and the air was as crisp as October. Only the dripping trees that shook down spasmodic showers of rain upon him, and the sodden ground gave any evidence that there had been a tempest. All the way home, his mind was full of thoughts of her. What was it she had said about the mountains? Something about shadows. Had they cast their giant, impenetrable shadows around her, he wondered, darkening her life? But, no. She was too much a thing of joy for that. Had the mountains kept her there, then, imprisoned because they recognized that she was too unalterably a part of them ever to be separated from them? He tried to picture her walking down a street of his own city. He couldn't, and yet she was no shadow, but very real and vital.

Back in his room, he reached in his pocket for his letter.

His hand closed round something bulging and sticky. The piper's candy and rather the worse for wear. To-morrow he would replace it with some fresh. This was water-soaked beyond recovery, and presented a rather ludicrous appearance when he extricated it from the brown paper bag on which its gay ribbon-stripes had imprinted a sickly, varicolored pattern.

Before he went to bed, he wrote to Clarice. He found it difficult to do this because he knew she could not possibly be interested in any of the things that he was doing now, but he managed to make the letter fairly long, telling her about his hikes, his trout fishing with the genial old pastor, whom he had met at the social center of the little village, the store and post office; of the garrulous old postmaster whose name was Gabriel but who, for reasons all too apparent to anybody who had ever heard him talk, was called Uncle Gabby by the boys of the village; and about the piper, whose flute could be heard every day, echoing in the hills. He was going to get a lot of books for him.

After the last remark he began to write Mary Malvern's name, but crossed out the letters. He could see Clarice as she read his account of himself as clearly as if she stood before him with her thin, inscrutable smile, her slightly puckered brows, her pale, narrow eyes, raised inquiringly to know just what he meant.

But she would be pleased with the check and that, perhaps, would make up for the deficiencies of the letter.

Her own note—it seemed a long time ago that it had come—he read again. A second reading failed to reveal a single friendly thought from her to him. What a distance they had traveled from each other, Clarice and he—miles and miles in actual space, and a long way in another kind of distance that cannot be measured by miles. Standing in the doorway of his shack and looking at the stars that were thickly studding the sky, he wondered if it were written in the destiny of either of

them that they should ever come together again. Probably nothing like that was ever written down one way or the other, but, now and then, one had to stop and wonder.

He drew in great breaths of crisp, exhilarating air, laden with the odors of the wet woods. How cold and still it was, almost like a winter solitude! But to-morrow—to-morrow would come the miracle of which Mary Malvern had spoken. The thought of her brought a healing sense of peace, and comfort, and security that was beyond his understanding.

VIII

After his evening with Mary Malvern, Gordon went on several long hikes with Peter Piper, whose naïve remarks and pertinent questions were a source of unfailing interest to him. The boy, he soon found to his delight, could not be satisfied with anything less than the most accurate answers to his queries, but he was too original to become tiresome and too eager to learn, ever to be a trouble to his teacher. As Mary Malvern had said, he knew Sunrise Mountain like a book and it seemed impossible to confuse him. On one or two occasions Gordon had been sure that they were lost, but in the end the piper had found the old, half-obliterated trail from which they had wandered, and gotten them safely home. His sense of direction, his familiarity with some of the minutest details of the mountain, and his certainty of himself and his surroundings were a constant marvel to the man.

Gordon was now comfortably established in the airy two-room shack which the Clarks had built in the heart of their timber land, and for which he had gladly forsaken his low-eaved, stuffy room in the lonesome farmhouse. He liked the sense of freedom and aloofness that the deep woods gave. But he never felt that the piper was an intrusion on his solitude. Evenings when he sat, book in hand, leaning against the tall pine tree that grew beside his door step, he listened for the flute, and was aware of a feeling of disappointment if, at some time during the evening, the piper did not put in his appearance.

"I must go to see Miss Mary part of the time," the boy said one night when Gordon had finished telling him the story of how he had once killed a bear. "Why can't you go down there with me," he asked ingenuously, "and Miss Mary come up here with me the other half? Then we can all be together all the time."

"That would be a happy solution," responded the man in frank amusement. "But we should have to consult Miss Mary first. She might not fall in with the plan."

Perplexed lines gathered in the piper's forehead. That was something he hadn't considered.

"But she almost always wants to do what I do," he announced after a thoughtful pause. "Anyway, I'll ask her. She would love it up here and she's never been here, has she?"

Gordon saw Mary Malvern only occasionally. Always, he observed, there was in her eyes, except in moments of extreme agitation, a kind of wistful quietness which could not be mistaken for apathy or composure, but which seemed more like a consuming hunger that had learned the futility of too great desire. He wondered if there were any connection between this and her music. She had been agitated, almost to distress, when, the night of the storm, he had spoken of her playing.

Frequently the piper talked intimately about her, but Gordon, although he listened attentively and was glad when her name was brought into the conversation, never sought to draw the boy out by any questions or to prolong the conversation after he had dropped it.

Little by little, as he climbed the hills with his faithful guide, enjoyed the fresh experiences that every new day brought, and slept through nights of unbroken rest, because he was too physically exhausted to do otherwise, the ties of his old life began to loosen their hold upon him and he gave himself up more unrestrainedly to the freedom that the new

existence offered. To forget was not easy, but once he had set his will to push from his mind every name and incident connected with the past, the effort had not been without its compensations.

He had from the first indulged in no feelings of self-pity or in looking at his trouble from a sentimental viewpoint. He believed that if a man were a man and not a mollycoddle he would stand up under his load without flinching. This he had sincerely tried to do. From no one but Clarice had he wanted sympathy, and he had accepted her coldness without any protest. But, even in his moments of completest relaxation, he was not free from a disquieting fear, which would not be disregarded, and which, in its persistency, was more than likely responsible for the deepening of the lines in his face, the graying of his hair at the temples, and the sudden expression of pain that at times overspread his countenance, puzzling the woman who wondered, now that she had come to know him a little better, what had driven him to the refuge of the hills.

Through Peter Piper she had come to enjoy with Gordon a kind of vicarious friendship. The boy's talk was full of him, and with a throb of gratitude that a new world of thought and vision was being opened to the piper, she went about her work, singing, happier than she had been for months.

Gordon was fully contented with the comradeship of Peter Piper and the acquaintance of a very few other people in the little village. He had never been much given to introspection or self-analysis—he had always had too many more important things on his mind for that—but it came to him, an unexpected thought, as he was returning from one of his fishing excursions, that very likely he had never been a social enough being. Certainly he was the very opposite to all that Clarice required in a husband. And yet, although he did not enjoy the kind of life of which she was a part, he felt that he was

social in the broadest sense of the term, in liking people and being interested in them. But he had always preferred to spend a leisure evening with two or three intimate friends than mingle with a host of acquaintances, gathered at some public function or other.

Leaning against a big rock, his fishing rod beside him, his lunch box within reach of his hand, he realized that never before in his life had he been so superbly carefree as now. After all, it was good to stay for a time in Lotus-land. He was all alone to-day, Dr. Carruth, his usual fishing companion, having been called away to attend a funeral in a neighboring town, and, as he sat with his eyes half closed, his mind, through force of habit, went slipping back to other days that stood out in marked contrast to these. Things he would have said he had quite forgotten came back to him with all the vividness of yesterday happenings. There were the hundred and one social affairs to which he had more or less perfunctorily accompanied Clarice, and where he had stood for hours, it seemed to him, balancing a cup and saucer in one hand and a plate of bonbons in the other, while he tried to make the necessary small talk to dazzling women for whose quick repartee he felt himself to be no match. In the midst of it all his mind was, more than likely, on some difficult operation he was to perform the next morning.

After one such occasion,—the Merriwether ball he believed it was—where Clarice had looked her loveliest, she had remonstrated with him for his indifferent behavior.

"Dan Gordon, aren't you ever going to learn to talk?" she flared up at him. "You looked for all the world like an overgrown schoolboy out at his first party. Actually, when Marie Van der Puyl asked you what you thought of the new mural decorations in the Merriwether's library, you said you hadn't noticed but that no doubt everything would come out all

right. If I hadn't been there to turn her attention to something else before she had time to think, I don't know what she might have told the Merriwethers. Of course, I knew that your mind was on the hospital, but Marie can be such a cat."

There were tears of resentment in her eyes and voice, and, seeing them, he checked the laugh that had risen to his lips, and with his arm around her promised to do better next time.

"Marie Van der Puyl is such a chatterer, you know," he said, "and she had been talking for so long that I had just lost the drift of her remarks."

Clarice, although appeased, was not wholly consoled. "You are so tall and good-looking in your way, Dan, that I might be awfully proud of you," was her final retort, delivered with a twist of her thin lips.

But, for all his efforts, he had never come to be a success, socially, and he was distinctly conscious of the fact that because of this he was a constant disappointment to her whom, in spite of all she thought to the contrary, he would have liked to please.

Now that he had begun to think back, reminiscences came crowding in upon him, and among them the ball that she had planned in celebration of their fifth wedding anniversary, and carried triumphantly through. He himself had hoped that they could go off to the country for a quiet day together, and had made plans accordingly.

If she were not too tired, and he knew that she wouldn't be, they might in the evening take in a theater or a concert as a pleasant climax to the day. He had had to disappoint her on so many occasions that he made up his mind this time not to tell her about his plans until he was quite sure that he could carry them through. When, to his delight, everything seemed to be working out all right in his favor, he

hurried home to her with the anticipation of announcing to her that at last they were going to have a holiday together.

But his simple preparations had to give way to her more elaborate ones. He didn't even have the opportunity to mention his, she was so caught up with the excitement of the coming event, her party, which, if all her plans carried through, would eclipse anything the Merriwethers, Van der Puyls, or Arley-Robinsons, whom she considered as having attained the very pinnacle of social distinction, had ever attempted. She had already a hundred things in mind that she must attend to, and he must help her. But in this, too, he had failed her. Fortunately Clem had saved him the humiliation of forgetting to appear at his own party by summoning him home the last minute from the hospital where he had absent-mindedly remained to work on an experiment; he recalled the dozens of appointments with her he had been obliged, for some good reason or other, to break; the affairs to which she had gone alone because of professional duties of his that had made it imperative for him to be elsewhere; he remembered the day—they had been married less than a year—he had come home with an engraving that had caught his eye in a downtown shop window. It was the picture of a mother, reading to three little children, who were looking up into her tender eyes.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" he said to her, laying the engraving in her lap. "Like you and our children you'll be reading to some day."

He was unprepared for her quick outburst of scorn.

"If you mean that for a joke, it's a pretty poor one, Dan," she flung out, pushing the picture contemptuously from her. "If you want me to look old and frumpy like that woman, you'll be disappointed. I haven't the time to be bothering with children. I couldn't bear to have them brushing against

me, like that. If ever I had a child, I should call it—Nuisance."

She was sitting at the window of her room and, going over to her, he lifted her chin until she was compelled to look into his eyes.

"Clarice, do you mean quite that?" he asked.

"If you want that picture," she answered with lowered eyes, evading his question, "I wish that you would put it up in your own room."

The next day, he recalled, he took it up to his room and hung it over his desk, where it had remained ever since.

What would she say if she could see him now in his khaki suit with the soft rolling collar, eating stuffed eggs and sandwiches out of a pasteboard candy box that the village postmaster had produced for him from the dim regions of his store attic? She would be as bored by her husband's hand-to-mouth picnics as he had been by her formal receptions.

According to her letter, she was happy. He wanted her to be that, and he was going to try to be happy in his way, too, without any more backward looks.

To none of his acquaintances in the village had he given any information about himself. That was one of the rules of the game. Presumably they were discussing him among themselves. It would not be in keeping with the social ethics of a little country village to harbor a stranger within its gates and make no inquiries concerning his whereabouts or his business there.

Once or twice Peter Piper had, after much coaxing, persuaded Mary Malvern to go on a hike with them, but almost always, when he asked her to accompany them, she offered the excuse of having to work in her garden or help some one out in the neighborhood. One sunshiny morning, however, she had surprised them both by announcing that she had the hamper all packed for a picnic at the cascade. Simul-

taneously Gordon and Peter Piper had tossed their caps into the air and followed her eager steps.

The books for which Gordon had sent at length arrived, and Mary and the boy found the keenest delight in poring over them. Among them were the "Idylls of the King," "Ivanhoe," and "David Copperfield," and these long continued to be favorites. The evening the big box came, the three spent a happy two hours together, Mary and Gordon reading by turns while Peter Piper, curled up on the braided rug in front of the fire, listened with ears, and mouth, and eyes that seemed to see.

"Now he will people the hills with knights and green-suited archers, and his flute will be a bugle, calling men to arms," said Mary as Gordon finished his chapter and handed her the book. "He is back hundreds of years ago. To-morrow his flute will be piping men from a thousand places of ambush."

And Gordon responded, "Look at the piper now, Miss Malvern; he is so lost in his dreams he doesn't even know that we are talking about him. It's late but can't we read one more chapter?"

The books proved more and more to be a link that drew them together. To Mary Malvern and the piper the evening never seemed complete unless Gordon were there to share in the reading, or the stories so interesting if he were not present to enjoy them, too. Peggotty, Ham, Little Emily, and David became household words, and the fascinating legends of the quest of the Holy Grail never lost their charm. Often Gordon and the piper would sit of an evening on the porch, talking, while Mary Malvern, inside her house, washed her supper dishes, and, with a throb of pleasure, heard amidst the clatter of her china and silver the low hum of their voices. Sometimes, her work done, she would join them, but more often she preferred to sit by her window, open to the fra-

grance and glory of the garden, and listen to them as her hands busied themselves over some piece of sewing.

A few times Uncle Gabriel gave Gordon mail to take to her, and, now and then, Peter Piper waylaid him on his way home from the post office, and begged him to go over to her house with him. It was always easy to yield to the boy's entreaty, and he came to look forward to these quiet, homelike evenings with as much anticipation as did the piper himself, and was disappointed if he were not at the notch in the hills to meet him.

There was something very unique, he thought, about their friendship, his and Mary Malvern's. Neither asked questions nor expected explanations, but each accepted the other on terms of friendly intimacy and comradeship. When, at times, he did not see her day after day, he realized what a place her frank companionship had come to fill in his empty life. But he did not once question his feelings for her. They were, he knew, wholly impersonal except that he prized her warm, generous friendship beyond anything else he now possessed. Proofs of her bigness of mind, her quick understanding, and ready sympathy he was continually finding. He had come to know her at the loneliest moment of his life, when all his dreams had failed him, and because of this, she would always hold in his regard a place peculiarly her own.

He had not heard from Clarice again. Gradually, as the days went by, even the vision of her melted into the past along with the other people and the things that had once seemed unforgettable. Sometimes, shut away from them as he was by physical boundaries, he felt as if the old existence were only a dream; that it would not be difficult to make himself believe that he had arrived in Lotus-land and had partaken of the enchanted herb that frees the mind from care and brings oblivion.

IX

One of the most interesting persons in the mountain village was the garrulous old postmaster; he was, moreover, by virtue of his conversational ability, his unlimited fund of local information, and his sunny good humor a very popular person in the community. He occupied a position of importance, having served, for as long as any of his neighbors, and longer than most of them, could remember, in the triple capacity of postmaster, proprietor of the only store in town, and Justice of the Peace. He presided over the little coterie of hangers-on, who every evening established themselves, according to the weather, on the piazza or about the stove of his cluttered store, with a certain ease and superiority that his age and position among them had bestowed upon him.

As Justice of the Peace, he had not been over-rushed with work. As he was often heard to declare with a twinkle in his eyes, things had always run along pretty smoothly on the mountain and there never had been many riots to quell. The peace of his long term of office had suffered but two interruptions; only twice had he been obliged to turn over the lapel of his coat and display his badge, which, it may be stated, his wife, for all of its infrequent use, kept brightly polished. It was not at all likely that she anticipated any trouble where the badge would be suddenly called into play, but it was consistent with her disposition always to have things in a state of preparedness, and to keep everything about her spotless and as near like the sunlight as possible.

And one of these two times it hadn't been necessary for him to show his badge, he went on to say. It was when he was young and kind of hankering to proclaim his authority. The other time, a couple had come to the store to be married. Dr. Carruth was out of town and somebody had sent the couple to the post office to him. He had married them, too, out of a little book he always kept handy for such occasions, with Mrs. Eustasia Whitcomb and the reluctant Martha Ann for witnesses, after which he had served them with lemon drops and peppermint losenges, giving them back their fee because they didn't appear over prosperous, and had bidden them Godspeed on their journey, adding to his good wishes one or two friendly admonitions as to how to escape the rocks and shallows of matrimonial life and make fair, safe port together as he and Martha had done.

Gordon had heard this story one rainy evening when he had joined the circle of loafers around the postmaster's wheezing stove, which, with every fresh gust of wind, belched forth clouds of dense smoke that sometimes made speaking, almost breathing, impossible. He had been amused not so much by the story itself, which apparently was being related for his benefit—the others, if one might judge from their expressions, having heard it more than once before—as by the old man's telling of it, as if the event he was narrating had happened yesterday instead of twenty years ago.

The topics of their conversation were varied. No matter was too momentous or too trivial to be outside the pale of their consideration, and usually before the evening was over, they had easily settled the destiny of the nation or, it might be, of the world itself.

To-night, as he approached the piazza, Gordon scented some topic of unusual interest before the house, for the voices were all subdued and everyone was leaning forward in an attitude of marked attention. No one took any notice of his

presence, which was also a little unusual, as he made his way to a corner of the piazza and sat down on an old dry goods box.

"Why, no, I hadn't heard of her going away." It was Dr. Carruth's deep voice. "I don't know how we should get along without Mary Malvern. She seems naturally to belong to the mountain and us people here."

"Well, her grandfather's will that's just been probated was a surprise to everybody," announced the postmaster in a matter-of-fact tone, reasonably sure that nobody there, with the possible exception of the minister, knew anything about the will.

After what might have been termed a dramatic pause, Uncle Gabriel volunteered the information that they were all waiting to hear: "The old man, it seems," he began, "has left all he had, and contrary to a lot of folks' opinion it wasn't much, to some church society, and hasn't given his own granddaughter that's stood by him and put up with his cantakerous ways, a penny. That's what I call not being religious, Doctor. Folks say he wasn't just right when he made his will and Mary could break it, but she won't. I guess he didn't leave enough to help out the heathen much, but even a little would come in handy to her now."

"Maybe she is going away; have you heard anything about it, Uncle Gabby?" asked somebody.

"The time has been when she'd have gone gladly enough," he answered, avoiding a direct answer that would display his entire ignorance of the matter.

"But it seems that of late years she ain't much cared whether she went or stayed. She's kind of had the spunk knocked right out of her. I don't know why folks is circulating a rumor around that she's going off unless it's because they haven't heard that she's going to stay. I often wonder what her poor father would think if he could see her now, all

soul alone with not a relation in the world. Why, I remember, just as if it was yesterday, the morning her father—he was just out of medical school, but he hadn't come up here to practice on us and, after he'd got his experience and killed half of us off, go gallivanting off to some big town for new victims the way some of them do now."

If Uncle Gabriel in his enthusiasm over his reminiscences left sentences unfinished, confused his figures of speech, or even contradicted himself, no one appeared to notice.

"But he had come to live among us and be one of us. Well, after a time, he went away on a little holiday, as he said, and he came back with a wife, the sweetest, prettiest little woman that had ever come over the divide.

"One sunshiny morning, about a year after that, the doctor ran into the store, his eyes shining. Mary's eyes are just like her father's.

"'Uncle Gabriel,' says he, 'I've a little girl up to my house, the dearest slip of a girl you ever saw.'

"'What you going to call her?' says I, not thinking of anything better to say.

"'Mary,' says he.

"'After who?' says I.

"'For Mary, the holy Mother, Uncle Gabriel,' says he, 'and we hope that she'll grow up to be as kind, and beautiful, and good.'

"At first it sounded sacrilegious," continued Uncle Gabriel, "but his face was so eager and serious—he was usually laughing and joking when he came into the store—that I knew he meant all right, although it did sound sort of flippancy at first. Well, they were as proud as peacocks of that little girl. When she was ten, she was only a slip of a thing, I remember, but bright as a dollar, not pretty, exactly, at least, not in the ordinary way any more than she is now, but full of life and sparkle.

"Well, when she was ten, as I started to say, old Miss Searle, who used to live in the brick house across from the church, began to give her lessons on the piano. She was the only one around who owned one and the thought set her up considerably. Now, I tell Martha, it seems as if everybody's got some kind of a musical contraption if it ain't anything more than a piano stool," he chuckled, running his fingers through the few thin wisps of hair that adorned his scalp, which shone so brightly that folks used to speculate as to whether or not the industrious Martha scoured it with sapolio along with all her other polishing.

"My, how that little girl could play. It seemed as if the music just flew from her finger tips. She played one night at a concert in the new town hall—don't look very new now with the selectmen too miserly to give it a coat of paint once in twenty years."

This with a wry twist of his mouth and a knowing wink in the direction of a fat, jocose-looking man, who had just alighted from a sagging buggy and settled himself comfortably on the piazza steps to enjoy his evening paper and cigar.

The postmaster waited what he considered to be a proper length of time for a retaliation to his little thrust and then, when no remarks seemed forthcoming, went on with his story.

"She had a red dress, I recall because Mother had helped her make it, with little strips of dark fur at the neck and sleeves. At least, Mother says there were. I ain't much for noticing women's rigging. Her eyes shone like stars when she came out on the platform and bowed same's Miss Searle had taught her to do. I poked Martha and says I, 'Mother, she's all lit up inside and it's shining out all over her'; that's the only way I could describe it, and, boys, it did just seem as if there was a light burning somewhere within her.

It kind of scared me to see the child like that, wondering what she'd do if some day something should put that light out. Well, as I meant to say, after all the other little girls had done their prettiest, Mary began her piece, and folks that had sat near the stove and got rather drowsy pricked up their ears to listen. And, boys, how she made that piano talk! She was only about thirteen then, but, thought I to myself, 'I guess it's a good thing that Mr. Paderewski, Miss Searle speaks so intimately about, ain't here for he'd feel just about like two cents.' Somehow, Mary's music made you think of things you thought you had forgotten. But it wasn't the music altogether; it was Mary Malvern herself. As Dr. Carruth put it, she just seemed to reach out and touch the hearts of people."

At this point in his story the narrator was interrupted by the arrival of a customer. Most of his audience, having ascertained all there was to be known about the will, availed themselves of this opportunity to take their departure. They were all fond of Mary Malvern—there was scarcely a home in the town where at some time or another she hadn't helped out in sickness or trouble—and they possessed a certain degree of charity for Uncle Gabriel and his oft-spun yarns, but no one knew when there might be another providential interruption, or how many chapters the loquacious old man might see fit to insert into his story before he reached the end.

When, after a very few minutes, he made his appearance on the piazza, only three of the group were there to greet him: the old minister, who already knew the story by heart, the jocose-looking gentleman, whose cigar was not quite burnt out, and Gordon.

Nothing disconcerted by the falling-off of his audience, Uncle Gabriel picked up the thread of his narrative as tranquilly as if they had all remained to hear, or as Gordon had

a feeling that he would have done had he been entirely bereft of his hearers.

"Folks from the city who heard her play said that some day she was going to put this little mountain village on the map. Her pa had all sorts of plans for her. He used to tell me about some of them when he dropped in for his mail. He was going to educate her to the top notch in music, send her off to Europe, and make a concert star of her, I guess. Dr. Malvern was young and genial and everybody liked him. After Mary was born, his wife was never very strong again. She didn't seem like herself and Mary grew to be a regular companion to her father. Why, she mothered every little baby in the neighborhood when their own mothers were busy and couldn't look after them, and all the stray cats and dogs; anything or anybody that wanted any special attention went straight to Mary, seemed to know where they would find a kind and gentle friend.

"Of course, she wasn't perfect. She had her spells of rebellion when the sparks would fly from her eyes and hair. But the doctor knew just how to handle her, said he wouldn't give a fig for her if she didn't show a little temper now and then.

"It was when she was fifteen years old that we had our dreadful winter. Si Whitcomb declares to this day that he and his first wife, Lizzie, went sleighing up through the notch May Day to deliver a May basket to the Morton girls. But Si don't always stop this side of the truth, so he may or may not have done it. I dare say he's been telling it so long now that he believes he did it anyway. The doctor had to ride over drifts as high as the houses. Half the mountain was laid up with pneumonia and the other half with the grippie—the flu they call it now. Well, it flew all right from house to house. And it seemed as if every other house on both sides of the mountain had a new baby that winter. Mary used to

go trudging through the snow with a basket of food in each hand, that her mother had packed for some sick family. After the doctor had got everybody well, or as many as he could, he took sick with pneumonia, himself, and died in less than a week.

"Well, sir, the village was pretty nigh heartbroken and Mary was the sorrowfulest looking little creature you ever saw; all the sparkle quenched right out of her. Fortunately the doctor left enough to take care of her and her mother, for poor Mrs. Malvern began to fail right off. The next year poor Mrs. Malvern died and an old maid aunt came to look after Mary. We could never make out how she and the doctor could ever have had the same parents. She was most twenty years older and maybe that accounted for the difference in their dispositions. Along with her came Grandpa Malvern, so there were three in the house again. From then on, let me tell you, that poor child walked a chalk line.

"Anyway, old Miss Malvern sent Mary through the Eagleville Academy, four years' course, so she did get a little vacation from her aunt's tongue, and down there she went on with her music.

"She carried off most of the prizes over at the Academy. When graduation came, old Miss Malvern couldn't go on account of Grandpa Malvern's having a poor turn, but Mother and I were right there and as near the stage as we could get. She had brought us the tickets herself, and says she in her pretty way, 'It will seem almost like having folks of my own, Uncle Gabriel, to have you and Aunt Martha come.'

"When she stepped forward to give her selection, the tears were streaming down my face. 'Twan't no gentle shower either but a regular spring freshet. All at once I felt Martha poking me with her new silk sunshade. It appeared to me that Martha's vision wasn't none too clear. I reckon we were both thinking of Mary's father and mother and wishing they

could be there. She told me afterwards she was afraid that Mary would be disturbed if she saw me. But bless you, she didn't see us or anybody else, she was that far away. Her eyes were filled with that beyond-the-hill expression of hers that she still has. She finished with a little piece of verse. I ain't much on poetry, but I had Mother look it up when we got home and I learned it:

‘Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.’

“The next summer after that, a big musician from New York came here for his health. He happened to drop into church one Sunday and heard Mary play. He asked us all about her, said she had a wonderful gift.

“Well, to make a long story short—” a feat which, in truth, Uncle Gabriel was rarely able to accomplish—“after a lot of arguing, he persuaded old Miss Malvern to let him give the girl lessons. He stayed here all that year and was around for a couple of summers after that. When he went the last time, he offered to send Mary to Europe and it did seem as if her father's dream for her was coming true. But old Miss Malvern wouldn't hear to it. But he had a will to match the old lady's and was bent on having his way, and at last he persuaded her that it was what her brother would have wanted, and said that Mary could pay him back, and that maybe God had sent him to carry out the doctor's plans. I always thought that was a pleasing bit of fiction on his part for he wasn't particularly religious, but he knew that old Miss Malvern set great store by what she called her religion, just as if she had a mortgage on it, and so he used the argument as his last piece of bait and, I vum, it caught the old lady.

"I suppose the ways of Providence are past finding out, leastways that's what the preachers tell us, but sometimes they set a person wondering. The night before Mary was to start if old Miss Malvern didn't up and have a stroke, and for ten years Mary took care of that cantakerous old woman with the patience of an angel. Nobody ever heard a word out of her about her disappointment; she just sort of bent her back to the load that had slid so unexpectedly onto it.

"After her aunt died, she thought she'd go away and train for a nurse. She had a knack of taking care of sick folks, and she had had plenty of practice with old Miss Malvern. A distant cousin was coming to look after her grandfather, but the last minute, after Mary's plans were all laid and Mother had helped her make her aprons and dresses, she up and wrote she couldn't come. As things turned out, it was just as well she didn't, for she died the next year. The old man was growing feeble and didn't seem to want anybody around but Mary, so she looked out for him and taught the village school for a couple of years, and gave music lessons in the bargain. But last year she had to stay with him every minute, and he was awful to get along with. He and his daughter were two of a kind. The old man died this spring, and now she's left alone and without a cent from him, it seems.

"She is really not like any of the rest of us, you may have noticed," he remarked, turning to Gordon. "There's something about her that distances her from us—and yet, she seems to belong to the mountain more than anyone else. You know, sometimes, when I look at her, I think of the morning the doctor dropped in to tell me that he had a little girl up at his house, named after the holy Mother."

In concluding his story, Uncle Gabriel had come back, after devious and circuitous digressions, to the place where he had started.

One of his friends had once remarked that he would like

to hear Uncle Gabby well enough if only he could manage to get to his destination without making so many detours. But to-night the detours had all seemed to Gordon very necessary, and he had listened to every word with an intensity of interest to which the old man was unaccustomed and which had warmed him to his subject. Dr. Carruth had quietly walked away and the stout man driven off in his sagging buggy, but Gordon had felt no inclination to leave before the end of the story.

"Now, she has that uncommon boy, Peter Piper, to look after," concluded Uncle Gabriel, getting painfully to his feet and stretching out first one stiff limb and then the other. "She has done wonders for him. I vum, he asks the most uncommon questions and the worst of it is, he won't be put off. The other morning says he to me, 'Uncle Gabby, what does God look like?'

"'Blest if I know,' says I, wondering what in the world was coming next.

"'What do you suppose his mother is like?' says he.

"'You mean Mary?' I asked, thinking we were getting onto a little less slipper" ground.

"He nodded.

"'Well, that ain't quite so hard,' says I. 'There's plenty of pictures of her though they don't all agree as to looks.' I was going to tell him about a picture Martha had when he up and asked me if I didn't probably think she looked like Miss Mary.

"'My land,' I says, 'what put that into your head?'

"'I don't know why, Uncle Gabby,' he says to me real solemn like. 'Maybe, it's because their names are the same.'

"He sets an awful store by her. I guess it would kill him if she ever went away from here. Well, I think probably it's closing time. I vum, here comes Eustasia Whitcomb. Ever meet her? She's Si's second wife he found somewhere

in Boston. Si went off on some kind of a summer excursion and brought her back with him. Guess he's been wishing ever since he'd stayed at home. Folks say he advertised for a wife and she answered the ad, but I wouldn't be unkind enough to circulate that story. The fellows here call her the Empress on account of her dimensions and the way she sweeps around as if she owned the mountain and everybody on it. Why, when she first came, she had all the airs of a self-appointed missionary to the heathen. Eustasia is our poetess. Maybe you've read some of her verses in 'The Mountain Eagle.' There wouldn't anything else publish them, but the 'Eagle's' glad of anything that will help fill its columns. She's a newspaper in herself, morning, evening, and special edition, combined. She always sweeps into the store just closing time," he finished under his breath, "and then, when I come jogging home late, Mother blames me for hanging round and talking with the boys. Women are pretty contrary sometimes. You're staying here quite a spell, aren't you?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject as Mrs. Eustasia Whitcomb in the grandeur of a purple silk dress, which set off the generous contour of her person, rustled past with an air of majesty and a regal inclination of her head, which, Gordon thought, fully justified her sobriquet of "the Empress."

"Yes, I am staying a long time," Gordon answered, getting up from the dry goods box. "You have lived here all your life, I take it."

"Yes, I tell Mother that our roots are spread so deep in the hills that we couldn't transplant ourselves now if we wanted to."

Saying which, he hobbled into the store to attend to the wants of Mrs. Eustasia Whitcomb, who showed by her restless moving from one place to another that she was impatient for his coming.

X

It was dusk when Gordon passed down the post-office steps, and a star or two glimmered through the sultry haze of the sky. His mind was empty of everything but the old man's story. Knowing Mary Malvern as he did now, he could not conceive of her having accepted what Uncle Gabriel had called "her lot" in any passive way. She was not a person to whom one could justly apply the term resigned. She was too utterly alive for that. Never had he seen in any being such a mingling of vivacity and quiet. Nor had her constant association with the commonplace dulled her vision. It might be that the hills themselves, which had shut her in, had saved her from such a tragedy.

Once he had seen a race horse that had been broken to the plough. Splendidly the spirited creature performed his task, but, now and then, in the midst of his labor, there would come a sudden flashing of his eye, a pricking of his ears, a quick dilation of his nostrils, and a straining forward of his muscles to cut loose from the restraining plough and be off. Nature had molded him for the race, for long, curving tracks and wide, open stretches, with applause to nerve him on, and a goal to be won; not for the narrow, hampering confines of the irksome ploughshare, and, yet, the horse had not commanded his pity but a kind of respect and admiration.

Fifteen years of Mary Malvern's life, that might have been rich and eventful, spent in caring for two ungrateful old

people! He felt himself doubtful, wondering, but of one thing he was sure—her life had been hard, disappointing, but the years had not been empty or unlived. With her this would have been impossible.

A sultry mist was spreading itself over the hills and fields. The raucous croaking of the frogs and the guttural cry of the katydids broke discordantly upon the stillness. A little way down the road, a tall, slim figure was coming slowly, and a little unsteadily, as if weighed down by something heavy. Before he had gone much farther, he saw that it was Mary Malvern, and that she was carrying a child in her arms. In her white dress and dark cape, from which the hood had slipped back so that it formed a kind of nimbus about her head, and with the little one nestled to her breast, she was not unlike a beautiful painting he had once seen of the holy Mother and her infant child. After the postmaster's story, the resemblance was startling.

"Mr. Gordon!" she exclaimed in her low, vibrant voice. "Uncle Gabriel hasn't gone then? I thought that I could see a dim light through the trees but I wasn't sure."

"He is still there," answered Gordon. "I'll run back and get the mail for you."

"But I have to go past the post office. I'm taking little Hughie Duncan home; I've had him all day. He was too tired to walk another step and he went to sleep almost as soon as I picked him up. I was going to keep him all night, but his brother is not so well and his mother wanted me to come down and stay with her. Mr. Duncan is away. The oldest boy got a rusty fish-hook into his leg last week and blood poisoning set in; he's over the worst of it now, but his mother is all tired out."

"Then I am going down there with you," he said, taking the baby from her sagging arms. "He is too heavy for you to carry so far."

"He doesn't so much as stir," she whispered, straightening herself. "I guess I let him play too hard. Isn't he wonderful? He's more comfortable with you; your arms make a bigger cradle."

When they reached the post office, Uncle Gabriel was just locking the door. He came limping down the steps, a paper in his hand.

"This foggy weather," he called, "don't help my rheumatics much but, then, just a little while ago I was complaining about the drought so I guess, like all the rest, I'm a kind of cantankerous old critter to please. Seems to me you're looking kind of peaked again, Mary. Aren't working too hard, are you?" he inquired solicitously, peering at her over his spectacles.

"I'm not doing anything any more, Uncle Gabriel," she smiled. "Why, I must be the most idle person in the world, I think. I don't work and I don't want to."

"Well, I guess you have earned your vacation," he commented, handing her her paper. "Mother's been wondering why you ain't been up, but I told her, 'Law sakes, they've got their annual new baby down at Brown's, Ezra Perkins' boy has fallen off the hayrick and all but broken his neck and, now, Malcolm Duncan's gone and got a fish-hook in his leg. And Mary's probably spending all her time running between the three houses.'

"Glad you're not letting her go alone, Mr. Gordon. I mustn't keep you standing here. Mother'll be sending out a searching party after me."

"I guess Aunt Martha won't worry, Uncle Gabriel," she said pleasantly. "She has learned by this time not to expect you until you come. Tell her that I'll be up again soon."

"He has always been such a good friend," she remarked to Gordon as the old man hobbled away to the hitching-post where the bony outline of Old Hundred loomed against

the dark background of woods, like some huge, gaunt apparition.

"He loves children," she added with a glance at the child, who was still sleeping soundly, his head on Gordon's shoulder. "He and Aunt Martha had two little children. They both died during a very severe winter we had about twenty years ago. He never mentions their names, but sometimes Aunt Martha talks about them to me."

"I like him," declared Gordon, "and I like to hear him talk."

"He welcomes every newcomer who will listen to his stories. He talks fluently, but to appreciate Uncle Gabriel you should hear him sing. There isn't much music in his voice, but he sings so heartily that everyone likes to hear him. Mrs. Whitcomb has tried in vain to drown him out and seems much disconcerted to think she can't. I am always glad that I am at the organ where they can't see me when they join in one of Dr. Carruth's favorites:

'I'll soar and touch the heavenly strings
And vie with Gabriel when he sings
In notes almost divine.'"

"Only in his case the notes aren't divine?" he asked, laughing.

"Peter Piper asked me when he was a little fellow if the hymn were really about Uncle Gabriel."

As usual, when he was with her, their conversation quickly drifted around to the boy.

"Where is the piper keeping himself?" he asked. "I've not seen much of him the last few days."

"The Skinners seem to be having another spell of keeping him at home; perhaps they think that you have come to claim him. They are always suspicious of everyone who takes an interest in him. Seraphina asked me if you really were a

prince. It seems that the piper told her the little story he invented about you up at the cascade."

"I suppose that people do wonder who I am and why I am here, don't they?" he asked doubtfully. "You must sometimes have wondered, too."

It was the first time that he had referred in any way to his coming. She did not answer him at once.

"I suppose that they have talked you over at the post office and settled your past, present, and, possibly, your future state more than once. But I haven't heard them. I knew that you were very tired and needed a rest. I think that maybe I have been too occupied being glad that you did come, to spend much time wondering why you did."

He had given her the chance to ask him about himself, but evidently she preferred to let matters rest as they were and was ready to go on with him on the same broad terms of friendship without wanting to know anything further about him. In this respect, as in most other ways, she was unlike any other woman he had ever known. Her absolute confidence made her companionship all the more dear to him. Had she chosen to question him, he was ready to tell her anything about himself that she might want to know.

There was a long silence between them as they walked along the quiet wood-road. Once she stopped him to listen to a hermit thrush far off in the thicket. Its notes were like delicately tuned silver bells on the clear night air.

"You have done so much for him," she said at last, coming back to the boy.

"The piper has done a great deal for me," he replied. "I like his sturdy self-reliance, and he has such a sense of humor mingled with his gravity that he is a constant joy to me. He has taken to biology like a duck to water."

"I am grateful for every hour you have let him spend with you. I have been wanting to tell you this."

"It's been a pleasure to teach him; his interest is so spontaneous. There's never been a dull minute for me."

With the postmaster's story in his mind, Gordon found conversation difficult and he was relieved when, as they turned a bend in the road, she pointed to a light, a short distance ahead, with the remark that it was where Hughie lived.

"I don't know how I should have gotten him home alone," she said as Gordon followed her up the narrow gravel path to the door.

"Do you think that the boy here is coming along all right?" he inquired. "Blood poisoning sounds pretty serious."

"I met the doctor this evening, and he told me that Malcolm is out of danger. Mrs. Duncan is so tired that she is over-anxious now. I won't bother to knock; she's probably upstairs in his room and there's no need of her coming down. Thank you for helping me," she said as he unclasped the child's hands from his neck and laid him in her arms.

He opened the door for her to pass in, but she turned slowly round and stood for a minute in the glow of the porch light. Her lips moved and he thought that she was going to speak, but he recalled afterwards, as he walked back up the hill, that neither one of them had spoken again, not even to say good-night.

It was a mile back to the post office, but his long strides soon covered the distance. His frequent hikes were beginning to tell in his favor. He was rested bodily and mentally, but the old irritating doubt was in his mind, and he had moments of depression that sank him so low that he thought he might as well give up the fight and be done with it. At any rate, he could stay shut up in the mountains as this woman, whom life had indiscriminately pushed aside, had done. She could have captivated audiences, but his conception of her as a distinguished artist had faded into obscurity when, for a mo-

ment, he had quietly stood looking at her as she held the little child to her breast. She had given away her youth here in the hills, but, in return, they had brought her something unmistakably precious, and, in setting their stamp upon her, had endowed her with their strength, and silence, and beauty; their laughter, and their tears, and the bright mystery of the stars that blazed above them. Something of her strength and buoyancy seemed to-night to flow out to him. He was distinctly aware of a new thrill of life in his veins, through the influx of courage she had unconsciously given him.

As he neared his shack, he heard the piper's flute. Evidently the Skinners had relented and once more he was free to come to them.

"I'm here, Pan," he called, sprinting over the last, steep rise. "Now account for yourself."

The boy jumped up from the doorstep.

"Angel's had the German measles. They were going to send for Miss Mary, but she's over them now."

"Well, that's good; Miss Mary seems to have her hands full just now. Is it bugs or stars to-night?"

"Bugs, I guess; I've a funny one here," he announced as he and Gordon entered the shack together.

Peter Piper did not put in his appearance all the next week, and Gordon did not see Mary Malvern until the arrival of a package of books gave him a reason for going down to her house. He found her, troweling in her garden, a blue figure among the stately hollyhocks and larkspur. When she raised herself to look across the green fields, she saw him standing by the gate with his bulky package.

"I thought that you were never coming again," she cried, pushing back her broad-brimmed garden hat. "Oh, you've more books for Peter Piper."

"For both of you," he answered, opening the gate. "This time, some of the things I heard you say that you had always

wanted to read. They've been home on a dusty library shelf doing nobody any good."

Dropping her garden tools, she sat down beside him on the bench under the cherry tree as he undid the big package. Over each book she exclaimed. Poetry, science, story, and history—all were there.

"Peter Piper is coming for supper," she said. "We'll have this for a surprise."

In the midst of their conversation over the books, Uncle Gabriel jogged into view.

"Open and shet, Sign of more wet," he called as soon as he spied them under the cherry tree.

"Why, you don't think it's going to rain, do you, Uncle Gabriel?" she demanded, jumping up from the bench and running out to his carriage to take the box of raspberries he was holding out to her.

"Well, I don't know, Mary; it looks kind of lowery. The sun happens to be out just now but you never can tell. That cloud over the mountain is likely to let out a squall any minute. My joints have been humming all day. Mother says I'm a regular barometer. Who's that under the cherry tree—Mr. Gordon?"

"Yes; he's brought us another box of books."

"Eustasia's been wondering what's been coming in those boxes. She's guessed all sorts of things from suits of clothes to home-brew, but she's never once hit it right," he said with a chuckle. "How long is he going to stay?" he added in a loud whisper, not calculated for Gordon to hear. "Mother and I are going to have him up to supper some night soon. Do you happen to know what his occupation is? Some of the boys——"

Gordon's appearance at the gate was a relief to Mary, who had constantly avoided being drawn into any conversation about him with Uncle Gabriel.

"Jump in, Mr. Gordon," invited the old man, "if you're going down along. You'd probably make it in half the time walking, but I'd like your company if you ain't in any particular hurry."

"I was just going to ask Mr. Gordon to have supper with us to-night, Uncle Gabriel," put in Mary quickly. "Peter Piper always likes to have him tell him about the new books. This makes the third box."

"Miss Malvern knows that I don't need a second invitation," responded Gordon with an unmistakable eagerness that did not escape the old man's observation.

"Well then, I'll be going along. You had better pick up your tools and get under cover."

He clucked encouragingly to his horse, but Old Hundred moved leisurely in his tracks and gave no evidence that he shared his master's fear of a sudden downpour.

"Makes me think of a verse of Scripture, Old Hundred does," shouted Uncle Gabriel as he shoved the whip into the socket and hung the reins over the dashboard,—"none of these things move me." Well, maybe it ain't such a bad disposition to have, after all."

"Oh, Uncle Gabriel," called Mary, "do thank Aunt Martha for the berries, and tell her I'm coming up soon."

She got his answering nod and smile, then with Gordon returned to the books. Before they had them carefully stowed away in the house, where Peter Piper would not stumble upon them, the sun was out.

"Uncle Gabriel's squall has changed its mind," she remarked quietly, picking up the trowel.

Gordon helped her with her gardening until they heard the piper's flute beyond the fir grove. Presently he burst into view. "A little musical cyclone," Mary said.

"Now, Peter Piper, guess who is here," she cried.

"Uncle Gabriel," he answered quickly. "I smell Aunt Martha's raspberries."

"No, Uncle Gabriel has gone; guess again."

"Mr. Gordon; oh, Miss Mary, can't he stay to supper with us?"

"That's exactly what he is going to do—and then—"

"We're going to read together same as we used to, aren't we?"

"And, now," said Mary, "I think that we have worked long enough and we're going to have supper, with raspberry short-cake and cream, if Peter Piper will get the kindlings."

He was off at a bound, Gordon following him to the shed with rake and trowel.

They reached the house together and Gordon lighted the fire. In the midst of her preparations for supper, he heard her say, "Oh, Peter Piper, doesn't it seem like old times to have him come again," and the boy's answer, "It's always lots jollier when he is here, Miss Mary. Wouldn't it be lonesome if he should ever go away?"

The pine twigs Peter Piper had gathered, crackling with a vim, the teakettle humming, and Mary singing, as she moved happily about her work, were all friendly and pleasant to hear. It was almost like getting home after a long absence, to be with them in this old, familiar way again.

The piper's wish, expressed between mouthfuls of raspberry short-cake, that they have another supper together soon was fulfilled by Aunt Martha, who, a few days later, entertained the three. It was a festive occasion. Aunt Martha, renowned on the mountain for her cooking, beamed from the head of her sumptuous table, and Uncle Gabriel regaled them all with stories to which everybody, including Aunt Martha, who had probably heard them a dozen times before, listened with rapt attention. Mary spoke the least, but one had only to look at her radiant face to know that she was happy.

After the dishes had been washed and put away, Uncle Gabriel led her into the parlor to an organ and beckoned for the rest to follow. Vigorously beating the time, he led them in the old songs, with Aunt Martha's cracked treble carrying the air; Mary singing a full, rich alto; Gordon, tenor; and Uncle Gabriel, a sturdy, if somewhat discordant, bass. They got along so well that the last mentioned was not contented to stop until Aunt Martha declared that she was entirely sung out and must sit down and get her breath.

"I do believe that Gabriel would sing all night," she observed. "He says he sings in perfect tune with the organ but, law me, the organ is dreadfully out of tune and has been for years."

"Sounds pretty good to me, Mother, when Mary plays it," spoke up the old man good-naturedly.

"And now, I think it's time we heard from the piper," suggested Gordon, who had noticed that the boy was sliding uncomfortably back and forth on the haircloth sofa, which looked as slippery as a bank of pine needles.

It was never difficult to persuade Peter Piper to play. Playing with him was as spontaneous as running, or talking, or eating. With his "little tune," as Uncle Gabriel called the "Berceuse," the happy party came to an end.

The next week Gordon, with Mrs. Clark's assistance, entertained them in his shack. He built for the occasion a long pine-board table and set about preparations for the evening with joyful anticipation. Mary Malvern had never been in his house, but she was coming to-night and, although it was barren and rough, with her there it would seem like home. He hoped that it would be cool enough for a fire, and was so optimistic as to get wood enough together to outlast the postmaster's longest story.

Gordon had had a second letter from Clarice the day before, written, he judged from the context, in one of her petu-

lant moods. The whole substance of it hinged on a curt query, which took on the peremptoriness of a command.

"Dan, why don't you go home now?" she had written. "Haven't you buried yourself in that forsaken place long enough? You must be in rather queer company, I should say—a gossipy old man, a half-witted boy—at least, you mentioned there was something the matter with him—and a woman who resembles the mountains. Rather a queer combination, I should say. But, of course, if you like it—. Life is getting rather monotonous now and I shan't be sorry to get back. I suppose, according to the plan, that you don't see any papers from home. I guess that things are pretty well changed at the hospital. But seriously, why don't you go home?"

Changed; of course, things were changed. He expected that—but how? As long as she must mention the forbidden subject, he wished that she would be a little more explicit. Each of her letters had thrown him into a torment of doubt and despair. Both of them had been reminders of what he wanted most to forget.

What would she say if she could see him now, chopping in the deep woods, five and six hours a day, for Mr. Clark? Probably, that she never expected to have a backwoodsman for a husband.

In the midst of his little banquet, a picture of her, as she had looked the last time he had seen her, flashed into his mind, and held him silent until, with one accord, they asked him why he was so quiet and Mary said, "A penny for your thoughts."

That brought him back to them, and, to please the piper, he told his bear-hunt story, after which Uncle Gabriel, not to be outdone, launched into one of his lengthiest reminiscences, which consumed the rest of the evening and bade fair to survive Gordon's stoutest log.

After they had gone home, Gordon, to whom the shack seemed suddenly very empty, took his wife's letter from his pocket, read it through slowly, tossed it into the fire, and stood watching it crumple to ashes. When there was not a trace of it left, he sat down by the smoldering logs, and with his head bowed on his hands, thought the long night through. And the first streaks of dawn, showing through his big east window, found him there, all his old doubts returned to his harassed mind.

XI

August went tripping past, and September dawned, clear, warm, and radiant. Mary Malvern remarked to the piper that she had never known a summer to go as fast as this one. It had just flown away on wings.

"I wish we could clip the wings," he replied, looking up from his whittling. "The fields are full of golden-rod and black-eyed susans."

"I don't like to see them," she said, an odd note of defiance in her voice. "They won't let you forget that summer will soon be over."

"And we have had such a jolly summer, Miss Mary."

"We have been very happy, haven't we, Peter Piper? The other summers just came and went; this one has been different."

His answer voiced her unconscious thought. "That is because Mr. Gordon has been with us. Do you suppose that he will come down to-day?"

"I hope so," she answered, bending over him to inspect the small boat that he was carving out of a piece of pine wood.

But it was an unusually warm day for September and Gordon and Dr. Carruth had gone fishing up a trout stream, about a mile from Gordon's shack.

The fishing trip was one of many on which Gordon had accompanied the old pastor, for whom he had come to feel great admiration and with whom, next to Mary Malvern and the piper, he liked best to be. The remoteness of the old

minister's life had given to him a certain independence of thought, but his opinions, full of freshness and originality, were never biased. There was, furthermore, about him a quiet force and a depth of reserve that compelled attention. A gentleman of the old school he was, conservative, reserved, and, on some matters, as set as the hills, but Gordon had found him neither narrow-minded in his conceptions nor prejudiced in his views. He had lived, as he said, a long time away from the rush of things, in one of God's solitary places, but, through the medium of his books, he had traveled in almost every country, and met all kinds of people. He had a great memory and there seemed to be no limit to his fund of anecdotes, which his sense of humor kept from ever becoming flat or tiresome.

The doctor, like Mary Malvern, had accepted Gordon's presence among them without comment or conjecture. Once, when he had driven the other side of the mountain to call on an indifferent parishioner, and had taken Gordon with him, he had asked him if he had come to live permanently among them. Gordon's noncommittal reply that he had no plans whatever had blocked the way to any further questions. The doctor, however, probably hadn't any to ask, for it was a habit of his to take people for what they seemed to be worth. Moreover, he liked Gordon, who had become to him the most congenial companion he had known in all his years in the mountains. Sometimes, during one of the longer lapses in their conversation, there was borne in upon the old pastor a deep realization of the fact that much had been lost by him in his having been shut away so long from the world of men. At such times he felt profoundly grateful to this man for his companionship.

On this particular morning Gordon had been glad to escape from his shack and the thoughts that a letter from his wife had forced into his mind. She had written in part:

"Dr. Prince may have informed you that I am home but next week I expect to be off again. You don't mind, do you? You seem to have buried yourself up there in the hills for good and always. I really intended to settle down at home but Archer Merriwether has gotten up a little party—a very select one with hardly any of the people you don't approve of. It's only a four weeks' trip and I honestly tried to beg off, but they said that if I did they would give up the whole thing. It wasn't fair to put the entire responsibility on me that way, was it? But I couldn't under the circumstances spoil the party, could I? Even you must agree to that. And it is dreadfully stupid in town. Dr. Prince is a surly old duck; I've met him once or twice and, really, his attitude toward me is rather patronizing. I have never felt that he quite approved of me. There never is a flower in the garden. Clem takes them all to the hospital as fast as they bloom. Mr. Howard is still making a lot of unpleasant talk. But he doesn't get on with Dr. Digby, I understand. Do you know, Dan, it is getting to seem so natural here without you that sometimes I forget that one day you'll probably be coming home. Once in a while I wonder how we ever happened to be married anyway. Oh, I don't know how to say what I want to; I don't even know what I want to say so I had better not go on. Archer is coming this morning to make plans about our trip. I don't know just yet where it is to be to. But Belle Merriwether is going, wherever it is, so you can rest assured that it will be most ably chaperoned."

The letter left him surprised and not a little bewildered, but it did not affect him as it might have done once. After having re-read it several times and pondered over it much, he came to the conclusion that what she had not been sure of was what on one other occasion she had hinted at in the same uncertain way—that it might be better for each of them to go his separate way without thought of the other. It was possible that

she had arrived at the decision after serious thought, but it was more likely, he believed, more consistent with her character, that she had been influenced by a passing mood to write something as carelessly as she might have spoken it, which, perhaps, by the next day she would have quite forgotten that she had ever considered of enough importance to commit to writing. For Clarice was a creature of moods, and more than once he had made the mistake of taking her seriously and following suggestions that later she stoutly maintained had been made only in jest. He was trying to forget her words, but they were in his mind when the doctor broke a long silence between them.

"Fish are queer creatures," he remarked, looking down into the limpid water, disturbed here and there by the quick leaping of a trout, "and there's nothing so restless as a fish out of water; there's no question about that and whoever manufactured that expression knew what he was talking about."

He whisked in his line, with a jerk, an expression of satisfaction on his face, and slipped a fat, shining trout into his basket.

"That was worth waiting for. Now, Gordon, we'll go upstream a little further and when you get another, we'll call it a day's work. Nancy will have all she wants for once. Mary and Peter Piper are the expert fishermen. She taught him the art, and now I guess he has outdone his teacher at it. It was one of the things she discovered that, as a little blind boy, he could learn to do well."

It occurred to Gordon that wherever he was the conversation seemed naturally to drift round to Mary Malvern.

"There's no end to what she has done for him, is there?" he asked.

"No; in a way it has not been difficult for her to teach him because he is so responsive to her. He is very like her—you must have noticed that—in temperament, in his passionate

love for the beautiful, and in his absolute straightforwardness, and hunger for the truth of things."

"When you consider what she might have done, Dr. Carruth," reflected Gordon, approaching a question that had been in his mind ever since the postmaster had recounted his story of her, "doesn't it seem a pity that her life had to be wasted here?"

"Wasted?" repeated the doctor. "I should hardly call it that. She has had a hard life. Uncle Gabriel didn't exaggerate the circumstances of it. I knew them all, her splendid father, her mother, and the old aunt and grandfather. Old Miss Malvern was stern and unrelenting in her discipline, but it didn't affect Mary disastrously as it would have some children. She had too much imagination, I guess, for that. I feel that she has done the work of a lifetime with Peter Piper. You can hardly believe how unmanageable he used to be. She's given him his eyes. They are like mother and son together."

"Yes, but Mary Malvern herself, what about her, her side of it?" Gordon insisted. "Everyone seems to leave her out of the question."

"I've wondered, too, and I've never come to any conclusion. I have never been able to disassociate her from the mountains or to picture her anywhere else but here. She walks on the great hills with plenty of companionship; I don't know how it would be with her if she were among crowds, but I think that she would be very much alone. I'm probably all wrong. That is just a singular idea of mine."

"Strangely enough, it's one that I have had, too. I wonder if she impresses everybody that way."

"Probably not. Even people like Mary Malvern come to be taken for granted if they stay long enough in a place."

Gordon waded up stream and fished quietly until Dr. Carruth, who had gone in the opposite direction, called to him that he had caught a fat victim, a speckled beauty.

"I guess we'll have to be going home," he said, when Gordon had rejoined him. "Nancy will be thinking I'm having hard luck and she'll be making other preparations for supper. Look at the shadows over there on Sunrise Mountain."

As they got together rods and baskets, the old man quoted in his deep voice, from which the years had stolen not an atom of vigor, a little poem which he had come across in a magazine and which struck him as ringing true. Gordon afterwards wondered if their recent mention of Mary had prompted the old man's repeating it.

"Who has not loved a mountain,
He has not known a friend,
To stand with him,
In hand with him,
Until his journey's end.

"Who has not loved a mountain,
Its purple brooding calm,
The height of it,
The might of it,
Its hemlock-fingered balm.

"Its cool sweet evening breath of fern,
Across a fevered day,
The kindness,
That bends to bless,
The toiling valley way.

"Its promise on the morning skies,
Of sunlit trails untrod,
Each crest-blown fir,
Star touched astir,
That whispers high with God.

“Who has not loved a mountain,
He has not known a friend,
To share with him,
And bear with him,
Until his journey’s end.”

“Now we’re off, I guess, and Nancy will be—” He interrupted himself with an exclamation of surprise. “Why, here comes Mary Malvern, running at top speed. Whatever can she want? Mary, what is the matter?” he called as soon as she was within hearing distance.

Her white face, to which even her running had failed to bring any color, and her strained eyes denoted trouble of some kind, but she was too out of breath to speak.

“There, don’t try to say anything now,” urged the old man, laying a quieting hand on her shoulder, “not until you are rested.”

It seemed to both the men, who were anxiously waiting, as if she were never going to get breath enough to tell them her trouble. Her lips twitched convulsively. Then, “It’s Peter Piper,” burst from her as she swayed, and sank down exhausted at their feet.

“Poor child; she has fainted,” said Dr. Carruth, bending over her.

“No; she hasn’t fainted. She will be all right in a few minutes, I think,” Gordon reassured him. “She has been running hard and she is all tired out. It’s best for her to lie here perfectly still. I’ll run down to the spring for water.”

He was soon back and having raised her gently, he supported her head with his arm and forced the water between her trembling lips.

“I am all right now,” she murmured unsteadily as Gordon helped her to her feet.

“Now, Mary, tell us all about it,” prompted the old doctor kindly.

He spoke calmly enough although he knew that it was not like her to be alarmed over any slight mischance and that probably some calamity had driven her to them.

"I can't stay here," she cried, struggling for breath. "I am afraid that he is killed. He went up to Glen Cliff for some little blue spruces for my garden; he's been wanting to get them for a long time. He took little Joe Duncan with him for company, and some way Joe lost his balance and would have fallen over the cliff only for Peter Piper. I don't know how he knew it except that he always senses everything. Joe says that Peter reached for him, threw him to one side onto the pine bank, lost his own footing and pitched headlong down the cliff."

She covered her eyes with her hands to shut out the awful picture that the words summoned to her mind.

"Where is Peter Piper now, Mary, and when did this happen?" asked Dr. Carruth.

"About two hours ago. I went straight for Mr. Gordon. I thought that he could do something. Little Joe told us just what happened. He ran out to the road and Uncle Gabriel happened to be driving by. Joe led him in to where the piper was lying unconscious. He was half way down the cliff against a birch tree that had checked his fall. Joe ran home for his father, and he and Uncle Gabriel got Peter Piper somehow with a rope."

"Where is he now?" asked Gordon briefly.

"Uncle Gabriel brought him right to me. Aunt Martha is with him now. He is still unconscious. The doctor says there's no chance for him. He thinks that he has fractured his spine. If he lives, he can never walk again. Oh, Dr. Carruth, ask God to let the piper die," she pleaded. "He mustn't live like that! There wasn't anything I could do for him and I was going crazy, sitting there waiting. Blue spruces! I never want to see one again. Blue spruces for my garden!"

"As soon as you can walk, we'll go down," said Gordon in a tone of voice that at once quieted and assured her, and, for some reason that she couldn't explain to herself, gave her something to hope for.

"I can go now," she breathed. "Let's not wait another minute."

Gordon, taking her arm, assisted her down the rough trail, Dr. Carruth following with baskets and fish rods.

They reached her gate in silence, and turned up the garden path to the door, which Aunt Martha, anticipating their coming, had thrown open for them.

"I want to see him at once," demanded Gordon abruptly, his face as white and drawn as her own.

"He won't know you, Mr. Gordon."

"But I must see him now."

As he moved away toward the stairs, she laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"He doesn't look like the piper; hadn't you better wait?"

"No," he insisted, "not an instant; there isn't any time to lose."

"Then, I'll go with you."

He followed her up a narrow flight of stairs and into a small darkened room in which a big white bed was the one clearly distinguishable object.

Gordon crossed the room to it and bent over the boy, who lay so limp and motionless that he put his ear over his heart to see if it were still beating. Such a frail, little wisp of humanity he looked among the big pillows, billowing around him, that Gordon, regarding him tenderly, was conscious of a sudden tightening of the throat, but he made his voice as casual as possible.

"The piper is pretty well crumpled. I'm going to straighten him out a bit if you'll open the blinds for me. The light won't hurt him."

She did as he asked her and came back to the bed, beside which on a little stand lay the piper's flute.

"He's curled up, just like a kitten." Her words ended in a dry sob that she had not been able to stifle.

"Yes, I know. I'll have him comfortable in a minute."

He touched the boy here and there with firm, deft fingers, lifted his arms, turned him over, and pressed his hands up and down his spine, thumping, now and then, a little roughly, the woman thought, watching him closely.

He saw her wince as though it all hurt her.

"He doesn't know anything about this, Miss Malvern," he told her. "I am not hurting him. I was trying to find out something that is very important for me to know. I don't agree with your doctor. There is a chance for the piper. There are ever so many chances for him to live; it's the other that—"

The sudden light that had sprung to her eyes was of only an instant's duration.

"You mean that he won't be able to walk?"

"Exactly; not unless something can be done. I think there can be. Try to believe in me," he entreated earnestly. "I am sure of what I am saying. I've had the opportunity to observe several cases similar to this. I am confident that an operation can save him."

His encouraging words sent the color to her cheeks, but it receded as her helplessness in this situation confronted her.

"But there's no one to operate. There's not a surgeon within miles or a hospital and, if there were, he couldn't be moved. There isn't anything to be done."

"But there is. There's lots to be done. I am going to call Dr. Prince now. He's the biggest surgeon I know anything about. He ought to catch the midnight and be here at noon to-morrow. Meanwhile, we'll be getting the little fellow in as good condition as possible. There are a few things that need to be done for him and—I happen to know how to do them,

that's all. I don't anticipate any trouble in locating Dr. Prince because he is taking a vacation now and, fortunately for us, is remaining in the city."

In the anxiety of the moment, all reserve was swept away from her, and impulsively she seized both his hands.

"I can hardly sense what you are telling me," she said. "It seems like a dream, too good to be true, but I had the feeling that if I could find you, you would make everything all right."

"Perhaps, I can't quite do that," he answered, touched by her faith in him, "but I'll find somebody who can, which is the next best thing. I am going to the post office now to telephone. You had better come downstairs," he suggested, opening the door for her. "The doctor has given him something and his heart and pulse are steadyng. Come!" he insisted, when he saw that she was reluctant to leave the piper's bedside.

She let him have his way, although her only thought was to stay with the boy, and went with him down the stairs.

In the kitchen they found Aunt Martha, standing over a sizzling kettle into which she was dipping disks of yellow dough.

"Law me," she exclaimed, wiping her hot face with the corner of her apron, "it seems like frying doughnuts at a funeral, but I had to do something to calm my spirits. I don't suppose that Mary will touch one of them. It's an act of Providence that the Skinners are gone. They started off yesterday on one of their philandering expeditions, nobody knows where. Gabriel and I saw them all in the old prairie schooner. You're going, Mr. Gordon? I was hoping that you could stay with Mary a while."

"I'm going to telephone; I'll be back soon. Try to persuade her to eat something if you can."

"Do you think there's any kind of a chance?" she whis-

pered, following him to the door. "I don't know but it will kill Mary if anything happens to that boy."

He said that he would do everything he could to help them, and, by his promise, left her somewhat comforted.

Two hours later, when he returned to the house, Mary Malvern, Dr. Carruth, and Aunt Martha sat in her living room, talking in subdued voices. Mary, who had been impatient for his coming, rose agitatedly when she heard his step on the porch. She would have known it anywhere. Her blood answered with a leap.

He could feel the hushed expectancy that his coming had brought, and was grateful that there was no light in the room except the flare of the birch logs, burning slowly on the grate. Mary and the others were awaiting his answer breathlessly as if it were a verdict of life or death, which, in a way, he felt it really was. Mary was the first to speak.

"I am so glad that you have come."

Before replying, he crossed the room and sat down on the couch beside her. He had been so sure, and now he must take away all the hope that he had too optimistically held out to her. His hesitation filled her with distress.

"Tell us quickly," she implored.

"I have been trying for two hours to get Dr. Prince," he said slowly. "He is out of the city, no one seems to know where. Then I tried for Rice; he's the only other one I know of who could do what has to be done, but he was gone too, has started for Europe."

"Then that's all there is to it," she brought out with a finality of despair that cut him to the heart.

Aunt Martha abruptly left the room with the muffled remark that it was time for her to light the lamps; Dr. Carruth quietly followed her; Mary sat leaning toward the fire, nervously clasping and unclasping her hands.

"There's just one thing," he said in his desire to give her

something to hope for. "I left word for Clem, my chauffeur, to keep on the trail and to start with the doctor the minute he locates him. Clem won't leave a stone unturned. I shouldn't be surprised if he's found him, but I don't want you to hope too much and be disappointed. Has Dr. Bailey been in again?"

She nodded without looking up.

"I want to take another look at the piper now. No; don't come; I'll be right down."

"He is just the same, I think. I stayed with him as long as I could. It just tears my heart out to see him and not be able to do anything for him."

When, after a few minutes, he returned, followed by Aunt Martha with a lamp, she raised eager, questioning eyes to his face. What she saw there, mercilessly revealed by the lamplight, filled her with consternation.

"He hasn't—gone?" she breathed, starting up from the couch.

"No; he seems to be just about the same; his heart action is no weaker; in fact, his pulse is a bit steadier. He is holding on."

The man's even voice seemed to contradict the haggard expression of his countenance.

"But you," she breathed, "you looked just then like—death. I was afraid that he had slipped away while I was here. Oh, I am going up to him now. I can sit and hold his hand. I can't bear to think of him up in that dark room alone."

Dr. Carruth had come back and was standing, hat in hand, by the door.

"I'll be up here early in the morning, Mary," he promised. "Nancy will come, too, if there's anything she can do to help you."

Gordon followed the old gentleman to the porch, but turned

back to where Mary Malvern sat, rocking back and forth nervously by the fire.

"I am going with Dr. Carruth now," he said, bending over her, "but I am coming back soon. I can't leave you like this. I will do everything I can; I promise you that."

There was, under the circumstances, nothing unusual in his giving such a promise to her, but something in the way he made it, drew her eyes up to him.

The same unfathomable look that two or three times before had disturbed her thoughts about him was there, intensified by the utter grayness of his face.

"You know that there isn't a chance," she cried, getting up from her chair. "Tell me; I can stand it; I have stood things before; I am not always like this."

As she lifted her head, a gleam of fire leapt from her heavy eyes. "I'm not afraid to know the truth. I don't want to be fooled about the piper."

She stood facing him, her lips quivering, her whole body swaying toward him. Gently he forced her back into her chair.

"I have not told you anything but the truth, Mary Malvern. Nobody would think of playing false with you about anything. Things stand exactly as I have told you, and I'll do everything in my power."

That he brought out the last words with something of an effort, and as if he were giving her a promise that might cost him much to keep, was too apparent for her, even in her agitated condition, not to notice.

"I know that you would tell me only the truth, Mr. Gordon. You must forgive me. I believe every word you have told me, but you looked so different, when you came down stairs, I couldn't understand."

She passed her hand unsteadily across her forehead in an effort to think clearly.

"Don't try to understand anything just now," he urged. "I wish that you would let Aunt Martha get you something to eat, and then would try to rest a little."

"I couldn't, not now. Maybe, when you come back."

With Martha, carrying the lamp, she went to the door and watched Dr. Carruth and Gordon, their heads bowed in conversation, go down the garden path.

"The two best men I know," she said aloud when the gate had closed behind them.

"With one exception, dearie; you mustn't forget your Uncle Gabriel. A better man never lived, if he does bother me sometimes about getting home late to his meals."

"No; I don't forget Uncle Gabriel; I'm going up to Peter Piper now," turning toward the stairs. "You'll let me know when Mr. Gordon comes back?"

"Yes, dearie; I wish you could eat a mite or take a bit of rest."

"Oh, but I couldn't, not now; perhaps when he comes. Somehow, Aunt Martha, I can't explain why, but I feel as if he were going to bring things out all right."

"Who, dearie, Mr. Gordon?"

Mary nodded.

"If this Clem comes—it all hinges on Clem now. It seems queer Mr. Gordon knows so much about sick folks, Mary. Did you ever wonder why he happened to come here? Gabriel told me that some of the boys were saying—"

But Mary was at the top of the stairs, too absorbed in her grief to hear or to wonder about anything, and Aunt Martha's sentence was left dangling.

"Poor dear," remarked that good lady to herself, bustling into the kitchen. "She doesn't know what she's about. Why, Gabriel Bent, where did you come from?" she ejaculated, as the stooping figure of her husband appeared in the doorway. "What a start you gave me, opening the door so still! You

and Old Hundred will have to go jogging home together without me. I've got my hands full right here. Just now we are waiting for Mr. Gordon to come back. I don't know what we'd do without him."

"He telephoned or tried to for two hours straight, paid out a pile doing it, too. Eustasia has been ambling between her house and the store, making excuses she's forgotten something. Done more trading than she ever did before in a fortnight. I yum, I wish he could get hold of that Prince. Poor little fellow, I guess we'll all miss his flute," flirting a big red handkerchief across his eyes. "I've been entertaining the boys, telling them how I worked that lasso and rescued Peter Piper. It was the most exciting adventure I ever had, and if things turn out all right—"

"Gabriel Bent," cried Martha, throwing up her hands in despair. "Not another word! I'm that distracted now I don't know whether I'm on my head or my feet," and saying this, much to Gabriel's surprise and discomfiture, she threw herself into a chair and burst into tears.

"There, there, Mother," he comforted, awkwardly patting her shoulder. "I didn't calculate to upset you like that."

"I'm just a big goose," she choked, taking off her spectacles, and polishing them with the corner of her apron. "Why, Mary hasn't shed a tear."

"Her heart's shed a plenty of them if her eyes ain't. Worse kind of grief, when you can't cry. Why, Bije Flanders, when his second boy was struck by lightning,—"

And Martha, who had heard times without number the story of the second Flanders boy, sat back in her chair in patient resignation, while Old Hundred, at the garden gate, chewed up all the available grass and flowers, and awaited his master's appearance with cheerful composure.

XII

When, after a long, hard tramp over a circuitous route, Gordon arrived back at Mary Malvern's house, his decision was made. There was clearly but one thing for him to do—tell her the truth, withholding nothing. He had not reached the conclusion easily, but only after an hour of torturous thinking in which he had allowed himself no mental reservations nor spared himself anything. He had struggled to find another way out, a way that would be easier for both of them, when all the time he was deeply conscious that there was no other way but this one that was so difficult to follow. There was a chance that Clem would locate Dr. Prince, but so slim a one that he built no hopes upon it.

He stood with his hand on the garden gate, hesitating. On the plot of grass beneath the cherry tree there was a little wavering patch of light that came from the piper's room. Faint as it was, it seemed to nerve him on and give him courage. It was, however, with something of an effort that he pushed open the gate and turned up the garden path.

Mary, who was sitting on the piazza, leaned forward at the sound of his step. She had thought a dozen times before that she heard it only to be disappointed. But this time she was certain of his coming, for there was no mistaking the tall figure walking toward her between the shadowy rows of her larkspur and hollyhocks. Her heart responded with a great throb of joy and relief.

"Everything is all right?" he asked.

"Everything is just the same," she replied. "Dr. Bailey has been in again. Peter Piper roused a little once. He thought that he was getting the blue spruces."

A little sob caught in her throat at the remembrance of it all.

"It just seems as if we were trapped here behind these awful hills," she broke out passionately, "with no chance of escape. You think, everybody thinks, that I love the hills. Sometimes I have come to hate them. They can be so stern and cruel."

"I know," he said kindly, dropping to the step at her feet in much the same way that Peter Piper did when he had something important to impart to her. "Only the other day the Piper was telling me about the Glory Trail, your Glory Trail, he called it."

The motion of her low rocker suddenly ceased. There was a minute of constrained silence between them. Then she spoke.

"It must have seemed a foolish story to you. I first told it to Peter Piper when he was a very little boy. Something about it took his fancy and he used to make me tell it over to him ever so often."

"No, it didn't seem foolish at all. It seemed very real. I told the piper that you had been treading a glory trail all your life. I think he didn't understand. He said that it was all a secret between you and him but that I belonged in all the secrets now. That was the finest thing he could have said to me, but it set me to thinking about a lot of things, mostly of how I have never told you one word about myself or why I came here. I suppose that we haven't the right to let folks take us too much for granted. Friends have the right to know about you."

She could not understand what he was trying to lead up to and was puzzled as to why he should think it necessary to bring up this subject to-night of all nights, when both their minds and hearts were not on what they were saying, but in

the little room upstairs where the piper lay hovering all too near the shadowy boundary line of life and death.

"That didn't matter," she heard herself saying as if someone else, very far away, were speaking. "It was your being here that counted."

Her voice was so low that he was hardly sure that he had heard her right.

"Do you remember," he asked, "the Chimæra story you read to the piper up at the cascade?"

She nodded.

"You read it to him the first day I saw you. One of the sentences fastened itself in my mind. 'Nobody should ever try to fight an earth-born Chimæra unless he can first get upon the back of an aerial steed.' You see, I was up here to fight a kind of Chimæra of my own. I suppose that is why the story you were reading him gripped my attention. Now, I have come to be a Bellerophon to the mountain folk, an idler and a hanger-on, looking into the streams the way he did, and waiting. But you have believed in me, and the piper has become to me just what that boy who had faith in him was to Bellerophon."

So distressed was her mind that at first she was not even sure that she grasped what he was saying, but, as he went on, her attention was arrested by the fact that he was speaking with great earnestness but, at the same time, somewhat laboriously.

He was himself aware that, contrary to his usual habit, he was beginning in a rather long and round-about way to say what he had to; that it would be easier for him to merge into one brief sentence all the necessary facts and have done with them; but her mind was dazed enough as it was and he must make things as easy for her comprehension as possible.

"Only, like all good stories," he went on, "the story of the Chimæra ended happily; Bellerophon's long waiting was

rewarded; mine hasn't been. I haven't killed my Chimæra and never shall."

He spoke dispassionately and with no tone of self-pity, but her heart went out to him.

"Perhaps, you haven't waited long enough," she ventured after a little. "There was something else in the story that I remember. This is it: 'How hard a lesson it is to wait! For life is brief and how much of life is spent in teaching us only this.' That sounds rather inconsistent for me to quote after what I have just been saying about the hills, doesn't it?"

"No," he answered fervently, the postmaster's story of her in his mind. "God knows, it doesn't. Nobody else could say that sentence just as you do."

She thought that he was not going to mention anything further about himself and felt relieved. With all her mind on the piper, she would rather that he wait until another time. But after a long silence, he said quietly, "I had hoped to have killed my Chimæra by now." Then abruptly and as if the words were wrung from him, "If Dr. Prince doesn't come in the morning, I will operate on the piper myself if, after hearing what I have to tell you, you want me to. It shall be just as you decide."

If a thunderbolt had suddenly dropped out of the starlit sky into her garden, she could not have been more amazed.

"You, Mr. Gordon," she gasped, sitting forward tensely. "You will—do it? What can you mean?"

"Just what I said. It was only natural for you to wonder why I was so confident about him, why I contradicted Dr. Bailey's opinion but—"

He did not finish for he saw that she did not comprehend, did not even hear what he was saying, but that she sat lost in thought, her hands lying quiet on her lap.

"I read about a Dr. Gordon," she said after a little. "I think it must have been almost a year ago, a Dr. Daniel Gordon.

He had a hospital for crippled children," she went on slowly, as if it were with difficulty that she recalled the facts to her bewildered mind. "The papers spoke of him as 'the Magician' because he had done such wonderful things. I remember because I read it aloud to the piper. I wanted him to know that there were strong men in the world who were accomplishing real, worthwhile things. This Dr. Daniel Gordon saved a boy—it was a terrible accident, I remember, and the boy was never going to be able to sit up or walk again. Everyone gave him up, but this Dr. Gordon said that he could save him—and he did in spite of all their doubt," she finished with a little thrill of triumph in her voice.

"That was Dr. Prince's son," he put in quietly.

It was something like a sob that escaped her lips. "Ah, then it is you, you all the time," she said, the radiance of a new hope that had been slowly dawning in her mind bursting full upon her. The darkness hid from him the sudden light that broke over her face, but he caught it in her voice.

"It makes me understand so much," she told him. "But why did you send for Dr. Prince? Why did you wait a minute when you yourself are here? Why, the papers were full of your name, pictures of the hospital; all about the clinics and how you had set aside a day every week to operate on poor children who couldn't afford to pay. Yes, and all about the marvelous war work you did in France. It had slipped from my mind, but it all comes back now. The piper and I came to feel almost as if we knew you—and now we do. It's all just like a story, isn't it? And, best of all, it's true."

In the darkness he felt the tender glow of her eyes upon him. She was, evidently, ignorant of the other half of the story about which it was his duty to enlighten her now, and toward which all their conversation had been inevitably moving.

"I used to want to tell you about the hospital," he said. "I

felt that you would be interested and I was right because you were, even in a newspaper account."

"Why didn't you tell us? But I know," a mental picture of him, as she had first seen him, asleep on the cliff, flashing though her mind—"others have come for the same reason, to get away from everything and find themselves again in the hills. But now I want to know everything—the things you used to think you'd like to tell me, I mean."

So, in a few words he pictured to her the beautiful estate, with its rolling fields and glimpse of the river, that had been purchased by a Mr. Howard, a friend of his and a big newspaper man, who was responsible for most of the write-ups she had read and, later, for a lot of other publicity about himself and the hospital.

"Mr. Howard," he explained, when she seemed interested to hear even the details, "endowed the hospital in memory of a son and kept a controlling interest in its affairs. But he virtually gave everything into my hands except the financial end, which he generously insisted upon keeping until I should have time to get things onto a smoothly-running basis. One day, it was one of the free clinic days," he continued in a dry, emotionless voice, "and I had performed a greater number of operations than any sensible human being ought to perform in a single day. It was at the end of a hard winter at the hospital and I was pretty well fagged out without seeming to know it. I had been so busy getting the hospital onto its feet that I hadn't taken a vacation or even a day off in months. I was getting ready to go home when Mr. Howard's only son, a boy of sixteen, was brought into the operating room. He had fallen from a tree and was injured in much the same way as the piper. He was the only son living and had been born when his father was past middle age. When Ted was six years old, his elder brother died, and from then on all Mr. Howard's hopes were centered in the boy."

"Mr. Howard was frantic when they brought him word of Ted's accident. He had the boy brought directly to me. I had never been faint and dizzy in my life before, but I was that afternoon. I knew, as soon as I looked at Ted, that the operation must be performed at once and that I was in no condition to perform it. Dr. Prince was at the hospital and I suggested that he take my place. But the boy's father was in a frenzy at my suggestion. He was beside himself with fear, but he seemed not to have a doubt that I could save his boy. I remember that I staggered from utter weariness when I went into the operating room, but I thought that I could pull myself together. All at once, I was dimly conscious of everything's going black and of the instrument's slipping from my grasp. Ted died under my hands. There's been only one comfort for me since, and that wasn't any consolation at the time —nothing could have saved him. We were all agreed upon that. It was useless to operate except to give his father the satisfaction of knowing that no stone had been left unturned.

"I didn't spare myself with Mr. Howard, but told him exactly what had happened, what I had done. I don't know who suffered more, he or I, but I do know that I went through such tortures of doubt, and remorse, and despair, as I hope never to have to endure again.

"Mr. Howard could see only one thing and he dwelt on it until it became an obsession with him and his grief seemed swallowed up in his hatred for me. I had fumbled, he accused, and killed his son. He did not spare me in his paper. His implications were false, but what he said was literally true. He was too shrewd a newspaper man to make any statement about me that could be proved false, but one could read everything between the lines, and people read it and believed. He ran a headline in one edition something to this effect: 'Noted surgeon loses nerve. Knife slips in midst of operation, causing immediate death of patient.'

"He left me and the hospital alone for a time, but one morning he appeared in a gloating rage. I had made another fumble, as he called it, and he intended to give great space to it in his paper. It went without saying that all the smaller papers would take their cue from him.

"I had no excuse to make for this second failure. It was the first operation I had performed since Ted's and I sensed the fact—it was in the air—that everybody was expecting me to fail. I believed in myself until I saw them all, the nurses and the internes. They had been influenced more or less by the newspaper reports, and their disbelief showed clearly in their faces.

"Prince, who was assisting, saved the little fellow's life by taking the knife from my hand just in the nick of time, but it was the same to me as if I had killed the child. When I walked out of the operating room, I knew that I should never trust myself again.

"It was Dr. Prince who suggested my coming here and mapped out the course I have tried to follow. The thing he urged the strongest was that I should, while here, mention no names or associations connected with the past. His idea was, I suppose, that if I didn't talk about them, I should be less likely to think about them. That may partly explain my silence with you. The trouble is that after all these weeks of out-of-door life and rest, the old fear still tugs. If that didn't haunt me like a nightmare, I should return to the city and fight my way back inch by inch. It is believing in yourself that counts, not what others think about you."

"I wish that you could have told me all this before," she said gently, bending upon him eyes that were alight with tenderness. "Sometimes, if you can tell a person, it makes things easier; you can stand what comes better if somebody else knows about it. When your griefs are all locked up inside of you, and you can't let them out, they pain. You have been

very strong; no one could ever have guessed that there was any trouble like this on your mind. It's the strength of you that the piper has come to reverence after the fashion of boys in their hero-worship for the strong."

His soul cried out against every word that she was saying. Her whole conception of him was false as she must soon see. And he knew that he would gladly give his life to remain in her eyes the strong man that she thought him to be.

"Do you remember that day at the cascade, how you and the piper pretended that I had come here because I had lost my kingdom?" he asked. "You could not know how very significant the words were. They were the truth for, in a way that was very real to me, I had lost my kingdom. Only then I was not without hope that I should some day regain it, but since then—"

"And it was the little boy's faith in him that saved Bellerophon," she said, thinking back to the story of the Chimæra.

For some reason it was easier to-night to talk in terms of the Chimæra; it made things seem more impersonal to both of them.

"And Bellerophon," she continued, "having killed the Chimæra, returned, his eyes shining with victory."

"You mean—" he asked huskily.

"That if the piper could tell you, he would say that he had faith in you and would not be afraid. But he can't, and I am trying to say it for him."

"You mean that, knowing all this, you can believe in me, will trust your boy to me, when I am so uncertain of myself?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes, I mean just that."

Her voice, though low, carried conviction.

"There's a chance for him to live without the operation; if I fail— How can you believe in me?"

He had swung round and was looking steadfastly into her burning eyes.

"You have made too much of it all," she surprised him by saying. "No, I appreciate the struggle. You have given me only the merest outline, I know, with none of the hundred and more bitter details that were almost unbearable. But this is the way it seems to me. You were utterly exhausted and too thoughtless of yourself to know it. Mr. Howard through his newspaper talk created an atmosphere of distrust around you. No wonder with your strength gone, you lost control for the minute. Oh, Mr. Gordon, isn't it having belief in people that makes them able to do things?" she asked, sitting forward and clasping her hands tightly on her lap. "Up here in the mountains we all believe in you. Once you have been successful, there'll never be another thought of failure in your mind."

"Yes, I have been sure of that right along, but I am not willing to experiment on anybody, the piper least of all."

"If only you wouldn't let the thought of failure enter your mind. With restored nerves such a thing would be impossible," she affirmed courageously. "As a doctor, you know that better than I. You were exhausted then and now you are, as it were, re-created, a new person."

"It seems strange that I should have made it necessary for you to talk to me this way, Miss Malvern. I have always shrunk away from everything that bordered on the neurotic. If my trouble had been someone else's instead of my own, I might have known how to remedy it. It's been different, being mine; perhaps, because I have been too impatient with myself. I am sorry that I had to tell you all this, especially now when there is so much else to disturb you."

From the restrained manner in which he had told it, it might easily have been someone else's story, but, with her deep intuition of the matter, the woman sensed how poign-

antly every word of it had stabbed him with bitter recollection. Moreover, in her weariness of mind, she found it difficult to make the necessary mental adjustment regarding him. Their quiet comrade, hers and the piper's, with whom they had associated in such friendly intimacy—the distinguished surgeon of whom she had read with glowing admiration! No one could long hold him by any claims of friendship; no one could ever fully possess him, for he belonged not to a few but to the world, to humanity that was calling him now with clamorous, insistent voice. The mountains could, for a time, enfold him in their shadows, but, eventually, they would have to yield him up. The emptiness of the hills without him! And if the piper's flute were still—

She shuddered and drew her white shawl more closely about her.

"You are cold and tired," he said, getting quickly to his feet and opening the door. "I have only made things harder for you by keeping all this from you until now. But I should never have told you if this hadn't happened to make it necessary. If you could try to think of the story impersonally," he added, coming back to her chair, "as if you didn't know me, it might make it easier for you to decide what to do. There's still a chance that Dr. Prince will get here," he added, constrained by the whiteness of her face to speak some word of comfort.

"I hope with all my heart that he does not," she exclaimed fervently.

He gave her a long, searching look as he started for the piper's room. He brought, some minutes later, a cheerful report from Peter Piper. His heart was a little steadier; he was holding his own. She would have gone to the boy at once, but Gordon restrained her.

"It's torture for you to sit there and look at him," he urged, "and you can't do anything for him just now. Aunt Martha is

attending to everything. Dr. Bailey's going to stay with him through the night and let me know if there's the slightest change in the piper's condition. There'll be plenty for you to do later. Do try to rest as much as you can now."

She yielded, after a little protest, to his wish and, when she asked him to, he told her, to take up her mind and to ease his own, more about the hospital and his work there. Sometimes, in moments of extreme loneliness, he had imagined what it would be to talk to her like this and see her listening intently, her lips just parted, her eyebrows slightly lifted, her whole face alive with interest and understanding.

It was very quiet in the garden. The branches of the cherry tree quivered against the moon. The air was oppressively sweet with the fragrance of the flowers. Suddenly he leaned forward and took both her cold hands in his.

"You are very tired, and I am going now," he said. "Dr. Bailey will be here in a few minutes. If you want me, you have only to ask him to come for me."

He released her hands and rose from his chair. "I suppose that I had been hoping that you would say that the odds were too great against me; that you couldn't trust me. That would have been the natural thing, and settled everything."

"I am not deciding anything for you," she answered calmly. "Now, before you go, I want you to come up to his room with me. Somehow, I don't know why, but I am afraid to go alone."

There was a light breeze stirring in the pine trees, and the splash of late oars drifted up to them from the lake, which looked from the piazza like a large pool of palpitating light.

"Come," she said, rising from her chair. "Come up with me now."

It was bright and beautiful without, but within the little room where the piper lay, there seemed to be only sorrow and

the stillness of death. He stirred as they entered and tried to put out an arm.

"The flute is all right?" he murmured.

"Yes, dear," she whispered, bending to catch his words.

"Joey, the spruces," he called deliriously.

Her lips trembled as she laid her cool fingers on his burning forehead.

"They are all right, Piper," Gordon answered for her.

"Who's that?" he cried.

"It's Mr. Gordon, dear. He has come to make you well."

The ghost of a smile flickered across the boy's face. He asked for his flute again and, when she put it in his hand, he fell almost immediately asleep.

"Do you think he understood?" she asked tremulously.

"Enough to put his mind at ease," replied the man.

She sank to the floor and with a little smothered cry of distress buried her face in the boy's pillow. The piper was slipping away from her, and they all knew it; Mr. Gordon, her friend and the boy's, knew it most of all, but could not tell her. Heaven and earth themselves were slipping away from her; God was very far away. If only He would reach down and not let the mountains fall upon them. But they were coming, coming, drifting nearer and nearer, enveloping her in their mighty embrace. Only they did not feel like harsh, overpowering mountains, but like strong, consoling arms, mercifully thrown about her to protect and save, arms that were supporting her, lifting her gently, firmly to her feet. And they did not loosen their hold even after they had carried her to the window—she did not know that mountains could be kind and bear people away so tenderly and as if on wings; it seemed that there was much for her yet to learn about them—but held her securely as if they never meant to let her go. That was the trouble; they never had meant to let her escape them.

Coming from a very long way off, the other side of the mountains she thought, it was Gordon's low voice that brought her back.

"Mary!"

She raised her eyes to his face, bending close to her own. Still the strong arms enfolded her, not intending to let her slip away again. Somewhere, out of the dim, shadowy distance, someone that looked like Aunt Martha, in dressing-gown and curl-papers, was floating uncertainly across the room, holding a spoon toward her lips.

"Then the mountains didn't fall on us," she faltered with something of her old, bright smile.

It was then that she was conscious of the arms' relaxing their hold, and began to sense what had happened.

"There, dearie, you've given us quite a scare," whispered Aunt Martha. "Now, you are going to bed, and I'm going to sit up here in this big rocker right close to Peter Piper. Mr. Gordon has told me just what to do, and you know I have had considerable practice looking after the sick. You need to save all your strength for to-morrow. I'm going downstairs a minute for a glass of water and then I'll be on duty for the night."

But nothing could persuade Mary Malvern to rest until she had asked Gordon the questions that were on her mind.

He had, he told her, with Dr. Bailey's help made quick, careful preparation for the operation in case Dr. Prince should come. He wanted the big east room with its four sunny windows, and the long, high table in the kitchen. On Dr. Bailey he was depending for certain other things of which he had made a list, and there was a surgeon coming over from Eagleville early in the morning with all the things that Dr. Bailey couldn't furnish. Every detail was planned, and she needn't have a care. Only she must try to sleep.

She sent him a swift, grateful look. "I will try to rest," she

promised, touched by his solicitude for her. "And you? You need to rest, too," she said, scanning the lines which seemed since she last looked at him to have become accentuated in his face.

"Yes, I'm going to try to rest, too. We must both do that for the sake of the piper."

Although his voice was steady, she saw that the paper in his hand trembled and that when he spoke, he turned his face sharply away from her.

"We have nothing to fear, Piper, you and I," she whispered, stooping to lean her cheek against the boy's forehead, where his hair lay clustered in moist, dark rings. "Why, dear, you will soon be piping the spring song."

She raised herself slowly and turned to Gordon, giving him all the assurance that voice and eyes could command. "He is very dear to me, and you are going to save him for me," she said with almost a thrill of rapture in her voice.

Her courage smote him more than her grief, and he seemed suddenly to feel the contagion of her optimism. It was as if in some mysterious way his spirit were rising to meet hers in a perfect harmony of love and understanding that cast out doubt and fear and brought ineffable peace; as if out of his despair he had been lifted to her own bright realm of hopefulness, where he was being borne along with her on wings of faith and courage. From her luminous eyes, brighter for the circles that shadowed them, her soul looked out at him, trusting and unafraid. He knew that physically she was weary to exhaustion, but spiritually she seemed to stand before him glorified as he had seen her standing in the circle of light that made an aureole of her burnished hair, and smiling tenderly into the face of the little child whom she carried at her breast. Something deep within his heart responded to the challenge of her faith.

With a grave smile, he took both her hands again in his,

held them a minute and dropped them gently with the promise that he would not fail her.

When he had gone, she blew out the light and stood at the window, watching him until he was absorbed in the darkness.

XIII

On the first Wednesday of the month the assorting and delivering of the evening mail was an arduous task, since on that day *The Mountain Eagle*, the monthly newspaper of a dozen little villages, made its appearance and added conspicuously to the duties of the postmaster.

"It does beat all how fast the Wednesdays roll round," he remarked to himself, when, his work, after many interruptions, completed, he was jogging leisurely homeward behind Old Hundred.

Uncle Gabriel was the picture of ease as he rode along, his feet perched luxuriously on the dashboard; his rusty straw hat, which gave every appearance of having weathered the sun and showers of an interminable number of summers, pushed well off his head; between his teeth, his corncob pipe, which surrounded his head with a cloud of aromatic whiteness. The reins he had draped loosely around the whipsocket in order that he might give his whole attention to the perusal of the paper, which beside recording births, deaths, and marriages, and the visits of various citizens to neighboring towns, the erection of hencoops, and sundry comments on the weather and crops, included in its scanty columns some few gleanings of gossip and an occasional flight of poetry from "The Mountain Muse," as Mrs. Eustasia Whitcomb was wont to style herself. This month there seemed to be a generous amount of both prose and verse from her pen.

With a vigorous puff at his pipe, he at last gathered up the

reins and slapped them onto the horse, but to no avail, for Old Hundred, giving his tail an awkward flirt, as if to shake off an offending fly, continued his even jog nor manifested the slightest effort to increase his speed.

"Well, I don't know as I blame you," conceded Uncle Gabriel, "for not wanting to shift gears right on the steepest pitch of the hill, but there ain't any call, as I can see, for clamping on the brakes."

A circle of bluish smoke from the chimney of a small house, not many yards distant, caused him to slap the reins more vigorously than before.

"She's home, Old Hundred!" he exclaimed, rising part way from his seat. "Seems as if she's been gone a year, don't it?"

The old man had always insisted that his horse understood every word his master said. Whether or not this were true, his words now produced the desired effect, for no sooner were they uttered than Old Hundred immediately broke into an ungainly canter, his nearest approach to anything resembling speed, jolted Uncle Gabriel over the last rise in the hill and around the circular driveway of his spacious yard.

At the door stood Martha Ann in stiff blue dress and checked gingham apron, her small eyes shining behind brightly polished spectacles, her cheeks as rosy as apples.

"Law me, Gabriel Bent!" she exclaimed with a crispness of tone with which her welcoming glance did not agree. "You don't mean to say that you are here at last. I thought that I should have to come and look you up. Here I have been keeping a red-hot fire to make biscuits for you, and you've been sitting listening to the good-for-nothing gossip of a lot of fellows that haven't anything to do but hang around the store. I suppose you haven't had a square meal since I've been gone, have you?" she added in a somewhat mellower tone as, with painful difficulty, her husband climbed out of his carriage and approached the house. "You just hitch the horse

right there till after supper. You must be hungry and I'm not going to wait a minute longer."

With a meekness of spirit, born of his years of experience with his more aggressive spouse, he limped obediently into the kitchen, leaving Old Hundred to wander at will through the adjoining field in pursuit of whatever palatable nourishment was to be found therein.

"Now, Mother," he began with a show of penitence that would surely have melted her to forgiveness had not the forthcoming excuse been threadbare with age, "I'm awfully sorry to be late, but the boys don't ever seem to realize when it's closing time, especially days when the paper is due. I guess you forget that this is the Wednesday *The Mountain Eagle* spreads its wings and descends upon us. I used to think the old *Eagle* was pretty tame, but since Eustasia's taken to feeding it up with her musings, it's getting pretty rampageous. They'll be doubling up on the price first thing we know. Listen to this, will you, Mother?" he ejaculated as, with a twinkle of his eyes, he spread open the paper before her.

"I haven't the time, Gabriel, to listen to any of Eustasia Whitcomb's nonsense," she remonstrated, opening the oven door, from which issued the savory smell of gingerbread done to a walnut brown. "She had better be mending Si's clothes instead of writing poetry, and now you hurry up and finish getting ready for supper."

Presently Uncle Gabriel's head emerged from the hands-basin, dripping with soap and water. "I'll say the piece to you while I comb my hair," he snuffled.

"'Hairs' you'd better say," she commented, still with some asperity of tone, as she hurried things onto the table and kept an eye on her husband to make sure that his movements were not too leisurely.

"I learned it on the way home," he continued, ignoring her disparaging remark— He must make allowance for her

being tired and undone to-night— “Old Hundred didn’t feel much like hurrying so I had plenty of time.”

“You must have been hard up for something to do,” she exclaimed, setting the teapot down with a little rattle to indicate that preparations for supper were now complete.

“Well, anyhow, I’ll say it while I’m putting on my collar and necktie. I’ll lay it right here so as I can refer to it if I forget a line.”

Picking up collar and necktie, he began in a low, monotonous tone.

“Oh, how I love the silver sheen upon the hills at break of day,
And all the fragrant flowers that fade too soon and pass away,
The clouds like cotton sheep that in the big blue way do stray;
And, when the sun has set, the toiling tillers, driving home their
loads of hay;

In all these scenes there’s food for contemplation of the sorrowful and gay.”

“All I can say is, Gabriel Bent,” his wife responded, setting before her dilatory husband a plate of golden-brown biscuits and a jar of honey, “that if the *Eagle’s* got room for such nonsense, news must be pretty scarce, and if you have time to repeat it, I haven’t the time or the patience to listen. The truth is, Eustasia Whitcomb was never in her life up at day-break to see a silver sheen, whatever it is, or anything else on the hills. She’s the laziest housekeeper on the mountain and that’s no secret from anybody. Well, I suppose they have to fill the papers with something.”

“Yes, there ain’t been many births here lately and only one or two deaths. We stay pretty much the same, and we’re like heaven in one respect, at least, for there ain’t any marrying or giving in marriage. Why there hasn’t been a wedding on the mountain since Ezra Perkins’ oldest girl ran off five summers back.”

"Likely wedding that was," commented Martha as she stepped briskly back and forth between kitchen and pantry, keeping the while a vigilant eye on her husband to be sure that nothing was lacking to his comfort.

"Then, of course, there was Si's wedding. I suppose that was in one of those big Boston churches. I can't somehow picture Si in one of those cutaway evening suits."

"Well, it didn't take him long to get back into his overalls," she remarked with a snap of her dishtowel.

"Aren't you going to eat anything, Mother?" he inquired solicitously, putting down his teacup.

"Me? I couldn't eat a mouthful. Seems to me you aren't very much interested, Gabriel, to hear how everything came out. I thought you would ask the first thing."

"I've been sitting here calmly waiting for you to begin, Mother. You seemed so kind of flustered that I thought I wouldn't ask you anything till you'd calmed down a mite. All the morning I was that confused I was weighing things out wrong, selling salt for sugar and the like, but when I got your message that they were going to pull that boy through, I was so plum overcome, I jumped up and down in the middle of the store as springy as if my joints had all been oiled. Dr. Carruth happened to be in the store at the time and I remarked the same to him. Says he, 'They have been, Uncle Gabriel, with the oil of gladness.' I felt like a young colt kicking over the traces. The morning mail was just in and I was that rattled I got some of the letters in the wrong boxes. There wasn't but ten letters, a couple of cards, and a few papers so I guess the folks can swap them around easy enough till they get their own. Everybody's tongue has been wagging about Mr. Gordon. I told them all this morning that he was a big surgeon. They couldn't seem to sense it, no more than I could when I first heard it. He's been so kind of quiet and reserved, folks haven't got to know him very well, but

those that have, seem to think an awful lot of him. Nobody ever suspicioned his being one of the greatest surgeons in the country. He always seemed to me like a kind of big, overgrown boy, fond of hiking and fishing, and leading a simple life. Anyhow, I'm glad he didn't turn out to be a musician or a painter."

"Well I guess you may well be thankful; a painter or a musician wouldn't have been much to the purpose at a time like this. To tell you the truth, I'm about beat out," she acknowledged, sitting down opposite her husband and resting her plump elbows on the table, "but that blessed boy is going to live and walk again, and, oh Gabriel, Mr. Gordon is wonderful!"

Uncle Gabriel, seizing his cup, swung it about in a gesture of reckless abandon that threatened to spill its steaming contents onto Martha Ann's spotless cloth. But she didn't notice or, if she did, she uttered no reproof. What would have at any other time been in her eyes a grave offense could tonight, in the light of transpiring events, be easily pardoned.

"Oh, Gabriel, he was wonderful," she repeated, a little, nervous tremble in her voice. "Everything moved like clock-work. After they got rigged up in cap and gloves and what not,—Mary, too, poor dear—she had to act as nurse—Mr. Gordon expected the doctor from Eagleville to bring one but he didn't—they went up into that northeast room that has so many windows. My duties, of course, were all in the kitchen, but, even so, I should have been flustered if Mary hadn't been so calm and quiet. She moved around so white and still but so full of courage that I was ashamed to appear scared and nervous. I had to do something to take up all my time while I was in the kitchen so I set about frying dough-nuts to calm myself. I shouldn't have been so worried, but when Mr. Gordon came,—I never shall get used to calling him doctor—he was as white as this tablecloth, and he looked

as if he hadn't slept for a week. I tried to make him drink some spirits of ammonia, but he said that he was all right.

"Well, I didn't realize how many doughnuts I had fried, but when they came into the kitchen and saw them, a regular pyramid, they laughed, and then I knew that everything was all right or going to be. Talk about being confused, why, if it hadn't been for Mary, I should have lifted the stove cover and poured that sizzling lard right into the fire. And, Gabriel Bent, will you believe it, when I came to count them, there were ten dozen doughnuts. Mary is going to send them around to the neighbors, a kind of thank-offering she calls it. I guess I should have gone on frying until the crack of doom if they hadn't come. I expected that they would think I had taken leave of my senses, but they said they knew just how I felt.

"I never shall forget Mr. Gordon when he came down into the kitchen. There was such a look of triumph on his face, and Mary—well, Gabriel, all I could think of was the way you described her when she was a little girl and played at Miss Searle's recital. She looked as if someone had touched a light inside of her and it was shining out all over her.

"'Is it all over?' was all I could gasp.

"'Yes, it's all over,' said Mary and such a look as she gave Mr. Gordon. It seemed as if they must have some beautiful secret between them."

Uncle Gabriel had, perhaps, never in his life listened to anyone so long and intently as he had to his wife's report of what had transpired that morning in Mary Malvern's house. It would be unjust to assume that his absorption in the story was not prompted by his genuine love for Mary and the piper, and his interest in the doctor; but it is not at all unlikely that, as Martha Ann talked, there presented itself to his mind a picture of himself on the morrow in the midst of his knot of "boys," their eyes fastened upon him, as he

repeated, with all the enhancing details of the situation, which the practical Martha had omitted but which his fertile imagination could supply, the account of the eventful day.

"According to some of the boys at the store," he ventured, "perhaps Mary and Mr. Gordon have got some kind of a secret between them. He seems to have preferred Mary's company to anybody else's around these parts, although he has put in quite a little time at the store with me. I've said from the first that there was something uncommon fine about him and I'm glad for one if he has taken a notion to Mary. Of course, I don't put much stock in what the boys say," he hastened to add, as his eye happened to meet his wife's disapproving glance.

"No, I should say not, Gabriel Bent," agreed Martha, polishing her shining spectacles. "And it's lucky for some of them that they weren't living in the days of Ananias, though I don't know as the Lord would have wasted his time striking any of them down. Boys, indeed! Half a century old or more, all of them. Isn't that just like you to go to romancing over nothing. If you had gone through the academy, you would have turned out a novelist or, maybe, a poet," with a meaning glance at the offending newspaper.

"As for his preferring Mary's company, I don't know who wouldn't," she interrupted him to say, her voice rising with indignation. "Just as if that man couldn't go out to walk with Mary and Peter Piper and call on them now and then without a parcel of men, who had better be attending to their business and letting other folks go home to their meals, putting in their oar about it."

"But, Mother," he protested, unable to account for her agitation, "I thought that you of all people would be pleased."

"Be pleased? Of course, I should be, if there were anything to be pleased over. But I am not always jumping at conclusions, and as for outsiders, who haven't any call to be

offering their opinions, to be surmising that they are going to run off—”

With a snap of her eyes, which indicated that as far as she was concerned the subject was closed, she rose abruptly from her chair and began to gather up the dishes.

“There, Mother, you’re all beat out,” he said in the consoling manner of one trying to pour oil on troubled waters. “Nobody has said anything about their running off. I hope that everything will turn out all right, but Si Whitcomb told me that Eustasia said that last winter or early spring there was a sort of scandal or something of the kind in the papers about a big surgeon, and she was pretty certain the name was Gordon. Eustasia was on one of her sojourns she speaks so much about. Of course, not knowing before that our Mr. Gordon was a surgeon, she hadn’t thought of connecting the name with him.”

“If there had been any possible chance for a connection, Eustasia Whitcomb would have made it,” declared his wife tartly. “Don’t tell me any more of her malicious gossip. Why, Gabriel Bent, I don’t see how you can even repeat it after knowing all he’s done for us to-day. I suppose that she has been busy spreading that story round among the boys. You couldn’t make me believe one word against that splendid man if you tried all night.”

“No more do I want to, Mother. I dare say there ain’t a word of truth in it. Eustasia’s poetic imagination leads her astray sometimes.”

“Now, if you are rested,” she said, abruptly, opening the pantry door, “I want you to drive down to Mary’s. I’ve done quite a baking since I came home and I am going to send her some things. The poor child can’t live on doughnuts.”

“All right,” he answered obligingly. “I guess Old Hundred has finished his repast by now. He had some grain before he left the store. It ain’t often we have an operation

performed right in town, is it, Mother? And we haven't had such an important personage as the doctor round since that musical fellow that gave Mary lessons. He was all right, I guess, but somehow I take more kindly to doctors than I do to musicians. Music seems to be more of a woman's job."

"Why, Gabriel," she reproved, handing him the basket, which she had brought from the pantry, "how can you be so ungrateful when you know how wonderful he was to Mary and how he gave that beautiful organ to our little church for her to play on?"

"I know, Mother, and I haven't got anything against him, but everybody to his taste and I like this fellow better, that's all. And I hope that he is thinking serious of Mary. I never saw two people more suited to each other than they are. It's about time that some good gift happened along her way."

He had reached the piazza, but he did not miss his wife's quick retort.

"And I suppose, like all the other men, you think the most perfect gift that Providence could send her would be a husband."

"If he happened to be as fine a one as yours, Mother, it would be, of course," he replied with a twinkle, as he climbed laboriously into his buggy and gathered up the reins.

His wife had come out into the yard to send a message or two to Mary Malvern and to give him a little necessary caution.

"Tell her that I'll be down early in the morning," she said, "and don't breathe a word of what Si Whitcomb told you, and, Gabriel, don't stay to talk because Mary is all tired out or too excited to be tired—I don't know which is worse. I hope that Mr. Gordon is all right."

Uncle Gabriel waved a big paper bag toward her as Old Hundred gave signs of moving.

"I've got two dozen lollipops for Peter Piper," he said, "pretty near all the colors of the rainbow."

"Law sake," she ejaculated, following the slowly retreating wheels. "And I suppose you think that he will sit right up in bed and eat them or, maybe, you think he's up and running around, playing on his flute. He is a very sick boy and will be for days to come. I don't suppose they are even sure that he is out of danger. Mr. Gordon wants to get a nurse from the city, but Mary insists on taking care of the piper herself."

"No, I didn't suppose that he could eat them all at a sitting, but I calculated he might make way with one of them and keep the others to look at. He's uncommon fond of them, you know," he called back over his shoulder, "and they say that what you like never hurts you."

"Which shows how little you know about sickness. Two dozen lollipops for Peter Piper. Now, if that isn't just like a man. Remember what I said about not talking too much and don't forget the other things."

But Old Hundred had by this time carried his master beyond the range of her voice, and was picking his way cautiously along the down grade. Contented at the strange turn events were taking, and feeling characteristically optimistic about their outcome, as well as very much at peace with the world, Uncle Gabriel jogged along the darkening road, humming his favorite tune in a voice that quavered with age and jubilation.

"God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps on the deep
And rides upon the storm."

His wife, standing in her kitchen window that faced the sunset, watched him until he was covered by the distance.

"Two dozen lollipops," she said softly as she drew together her white sash-curtains and pulled down the hanging lamp. "If that isn't just like Gabriel. Why, what does ail that light to burn so dim, I wonder. I trimmed them all to-night."

She stepped back and surveyed it critically, quite unaware that she was looking at it through a mist of sudden tears.

XIV

A little less than an hour after Uncle Gabriel left Mary Malvern, Gordon appeared in her open doorway. She was sewing on a coat of Peter Piper's.

"It makes it seem as if he were really going to need it soon," she said, looking up with a smile of welcome. "I'm only taking a few stitches for the sake of something to do. I really haven't mind enough to settle down to anything. You came to see him again? He was sleeping soundly when I was up there a few minutes ago. It's so good to have him out of that dreadful stupor."

"You aren't going to stay here alone with him to-night?"

"No, Dr. Carruth's sister, Nancy, is up there now in the next room to his, reading. Dr. Bailey has just been here to tell me that there will be a nurse here the first thing in the morning. You have done everything for us."

"I know how much you wanted to take care of him yourself, but you can't realize the strain it would be on you. Your love would outrun your strength. I was glad when Dr. Bailey told me that you had consented to let me send."

When he came downstairs, she was on the porch and he went out to her with an encouraging word from the sick room.

"It's warm enough to stay out here a little while, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, it almost seems as if there were a little bit of spring in the air to-night. I suppose that's partly because I am so very happy."

"You are very tired and I am not going to stay long."

"But I'm not tired; I am too utterly happy ever to be tired again. Uncle Gabriel has just left two dozen lollipops for Peter Piper. I wasn't able to make him understand that the piper couldn't even eat one; Aunt Martha has sent enough bread and cookies to last a month, and there are all those doughnuts."

They both laughed in recollection of the pyramid of crisp brownness that had met their eyes as they entered the kitchen together.

"You will have to come often and help me eat them."

He didn't say that he would, but sat on the steps for a long time without speaking.

From the swamp came the usual night sounds, and across the misty field, a whippoorwill took up his melancholy song. The guttural cry of the katydids and the raucous croaking of the frogs united in a harsh dissonance, out of keeping with the rest of the evening. A fresh wind wafted in the acrid fragrance of the fir trees and the late summer sweetness of her garden, which the darkness had blotted out of sight. Presently, even the frogs became silent, the stillness deepened, and the stars began to come out.

"When night comes, there aren't any mountains," she said slowly.

"They hem you in; you want to go," he responded, quick to catch the drift of her thought.

"No, I don't know that I do now; not the way I did once, anyway. I used to want to beat the mountains down, trample on them. I don't know what made me say that just now; I don't know why I should have thought it. I'm not sure, but I believe that I was thinking more of you than of myself. The piper and I are going to be lost without you."

He was leaning slightly toward her, filled with a sudden apprehension that at once thrilled and startled him. One

may sometimes discover in a brief minute things that under other circumstances a hundred centuries might never reveal. Yesterday's and to-day's happenings had broken down every feeling of restraint which, for all their frank intimacy, had existed between them. To-night, after the struggle they had faced together and out of which, through her belief in him, he had come triumphant, they seemed, for the first time, to stand before each other, their souls stripped of all reserve. That to-night they were first in each other's mind was borne in upon them with amazing certainty. And now she was thinking of the mountains as a barrier between them, an impassible wall between his life and hers!

"It is up here," he said at last, breaking a long silence, "that one gets a true perspective. On the mountain tops one is very near the stars. That's the way I have always thought of you, Mary Malvern, from the first time I saw you, as living very near the stars, miles away from the rest of us and yet, in another way, very near."

"That is rather a contradiction, isn't it?" she asked lightly to cover her emotion. "And it isn't fair for me to let you think of me like that. I have been rebellious. I have told you that sometimes I have come to hate the hills. A hundred times I have wanted to cut everything and run. I couldn't; that's all."

"You have never told me anything about yourself; there was no reason for you to, but I found out weeks ago about your being all ready to go away, and how something always kept you here. Uncle Gabriel said that you had put music into almost every home around here. He meant it literally, but, somehow, knowing you as I do now, his words have come to mean more to me than just what he intended them to—to be significant of what you have done for them here. It was your own story that I had been listening to the night I met you carrying little Hugh Duncan home."

She sat very still, her arm resting on the table beside her, her face shaded by her hand.

"You can see what your courage has done for me!"

Although he said it simply, she knew that he was greatly moved. Dropping her hand from her eyes, she looked down at his dark, glowing face.

"You have found yourself again," came from her, thrilled at the sight.

"Every minute your belief in me was holding me up, lifting me above my own disbelief."

"And now you can go back to your work," she said, approaching the subject that she felt to be uppermost in his mind. "You said that once you were sure of yourself, you would be ready to fight your way back against people's doubt and criticism. You said that they didn't matter so long as you could believe in yourself."

"Yes, I know I said that and I suppose that I am ready, and yet——"

He waited a full minute before finishing his sentence. "I'm not so ready to go as I thought that I should be. Last night I couldn't tell you all that I had to say and you are too tired to-night to listen, but to-morrow I'm going to finish with everything, things that concerned me before I came here, that I ought to have told you about before, people connected with my life."

He rose from the step and walked to the other end of the piazza where, for a few minutes, he stood looking off toward the hills.

"But all that cannot matter now," he heard her say. "Before you go, if you want to, you may tell me about the others, but there's so little time left now, let's have it just to ourselves, just the way it has been—you, and I, and the piper, inside the mountains, and the whole wide world outside."

He didn't answer, but stood with his back toward her

until she remarked, "Nancy is going into the piper's room. He must want something. I'm going to him."

"Let me go," he said, quickly turning round. "If he needs you, I will call."

Gordon intended, upon returning to her, to go immediately home, but, when he came downstairs, he perceived that she had lighted the logs in the fireplace and drawn two chairs up to it.

She was happy, but she was filled with a subtle foreboding that her happiness was only transitory. This day had been theirs together. Nothing—neither time nor space—could take it from them. It would, she knew, because of its significance to both of them, have in both their memories a place of its own throughout eternity. For that reason she wished to prolong it to its utmost and had lighted her fire.

"This is the way it is in the mountains," she observed, putting away the tongs. "No matter how warm it is during the day and early evening, a fire feels rather comfortable at night. I am worried about the piper. When can we be sure that he is out of danger?"

"Very soon," he answered. "I think that we can be reasonably sure right now. His heart is perfect. You must let Nancy do everything for him to-night. You can trust her and you need to sleep."

"I couldn't sleep. Would it disturb him if I should play a little?"

"Not a bit; just now he is beyond the reach of music. And, even if he should hear, it would do him good."

She played a Chopin waltz and a fragment of Beethoven's symphony in C sharp minor, keeping her foot most of the time on the soft pedal.

"I feel more like a rhapsody," she exclaimed, looking up from her music. "It's Liszt's that you like, isn't it?"

She played it daringly and with a gay abandon that expressed her mood. In spite of her physical weariness, joy and vitality vibrated from her, full and strong. And Gordon, who had come to experience in her presence more and more a sense of security and peace, was, as he listened, not so much aware of her music as of her, of her vivifying presence that at once kindled, and thrilled. And as she played, she was, he knew, conscious of him as she had never been before. At other times, he had felt shut out from her music, that was a kind of ~~inner~~ self of hers, a kind of sanctuary into which she withdrew herself and which she could not open for him to enter. But to-night it was as if she had swept aside the last reserve of her being, opened the shrine and bidden him come in. The realization filled him with a kind of awe and made him turn his eyes away from her. It was all because of what he had been able to do for the piper that she had drawn so near. But that detracted nothing from the wonder of her nearness. Nevertheless, a feeling of relief swept over him when she declared that she had played enough, and pushed aside her music.

"I have been wondering where the Skinners are and when they'll be coming back," she said, leaning forward and resting her head on her arms.

"It's our good fortune that they were away. You don't suppose that they have disappeared for good, do you? What if they should never come back?"

"I know what you mean," she answered without a moment's reflection. "I should keep the piper. That's what I want most to do."

"You mean that you want him for your own?"

"Yes. In a way, I have always felt that he is my own. And when I think that you have saved him for me——"

"You can never know," he told her, his heart leaping to his eyes, "what you have done for me. Do you remember

that first day up at the cascade? You threw out your arm to save me from going over the cliff. You are like that with everybody, saving them, reaching up for them, making them reach up for themselves. You don't know, Mary Malvern, how glorious you are!"

While he talked, her lips trembled and the color came and went in her face.

"Whether I go or stay, I have to tell you this much. I want you to know that your friendship is the noblest, the best, and the truest thing that ever came into my life, and that wherever I go, the thought of you——"

He stopped abruptly, not trusting himself to go on. She, herself, could find nothing to say. But that did not matter. Conversation seemed unnecessary to-night.

He stayed with her a few minutes longer and left her a little puzzled. She had expected that, since he had triumphed over his fear, there would be no bounds to his joy, to his enthusiasm for getting back to his work. Then it came to her that he had spoken of there being something else on his mind, something he must tell her about to-morrow. She wondered what it was. He was happy; he must be. But he was tired, too. Every line of his face; every movement of his body reflected weariness. One could not kill a Chimæra and not be physically exhausted. She smiled in recollection of the story. What a long time ago since that day at the cascade! He would never forget nor would she. And to-day he had regained his kingdom and, oh, how certain had been his hands! All the evening long—he had not known it—her eyes had been caressing them, his hands that had saved the piper.

She heard the gate click behind him and, at the same moment, noticed a letter on the floor beside his chair. His name was on the envelope. Picking it up, she ran with it down the garden path.

"Dr. Gordon," she called, "you dropped your letter. I have it."

He was striding through the fir grove, her name in his mind so that he was not surprised when he heard her speak.

He had, ever since he had known her, cared for her honestly and nobly, but now, with the thought of his leaving her, there swept over him a great longing for her that in its suddenness and intensity disarmed him of his strength. It was as if he had already gone and hungered for her presence.

With a quick turn he went to meet her. His hand, as he reached for the letter, closed upon hers. In the fragrant darkness of her garden they stood face to face, neither speaking a word. She had only run down the path to give him a letter—the thought came to her—and here they were, standing in this constrained silence, her hand held firmly in his strong grasp. She attempted to speak, but her throat was dry and her lips were trembling. She could not understand herself or him. She had always felt such freedom in his presence. That had been one of the beautiful things about their friendship.

Down in the valley was a light, that caught her attention. A light that in the distance looked like a big firefly, floating slowly through space. She stepped in front of him to point out the speck of moving brightness and found voice to say, "I shouldn't wonder if it were the Skinner prairie-schooner, coming home."

As he looked in the direction she indicated, a strand of her loosened hair blew back against his lips. With his hands he held it there, and kissed it fervently again and again.

She swung slowly round and, looking up into his face closely, saw, even in the darkness, what he had not meant for her to know, his great overpowering love that filled him with a longing for her and, at the same time, restrained him from gathering her into his arms. She was so near to

him that she could hear the hard, rapid beating of his heart. Her own heart quickened in response as she moved slowly within his arms, that were outstretched to her, but that did not so much as touch her. This, then, was his secret, the something that he was to tell her to-morrow. Oh, but why not to-night!

He was as certain of her thought as if she had expressed it, and he was stabbed with remorse. But it was incredulous that she could, in any way, return his love.

But now that she had made the amazing discovery, now that she understood past any doubt, there was no longer anything for her to conceal. "We did not know before, but it's all right," she breathed, scanning his troubled face.

"You can't think of me like that?" he demanded, hoarsely.

His question, like a command, forced an answer from her unwilling lips.

"You must see," she answered, after a pause in which it seemed to him that he was wavering on the edge of an eternity of doubt and agony.

"Oh, God, not that!" he cried, bowing his head over hers. "Anything else, but not that! I am all unfit, unworthy. I have—"

She would not let him go on. "But now that I do know, what difference can it make?"

He did not answer at once. She thought that perhaps he hadn't even heard her, but he had, for presently he said, "It makes all the difference in the world to me."

They sat down on the bench under the cherry tree, whose crisp leaves seemed to shiver in the wind and move uncertainly on their branches. She could hear his quick, hard breathing; feel his hand groping for hers.

"I have done you a great wrong, Mary," he began tenderly, his face turned toward the light that came from the piper's room. "But it was beyond my comprehension that you could

come to care for me like this. I wonder when you first knew." It was the old question, put with hesitancy and dismay.

"I can't tell you that," she answered. "Perhaps, just then, when we stood together looking at the light, the big firefly or the falling star, or whatever it was, only it seems now that I must always have known, that there was never any beginning, that there never can be any end to my love for you."

"It is your love for the piper that makes you think that," he replied, hoping doubtfully that it was true. "Your gratitude is so deep that—"

"No, it's not that; it's all so different from anything I ever felt before."

He was overwhelmed with compunction for her. "I am all unworthy of that," he said, covering his eyes from her face. "When you know—"

"It can't make any difference; nothing can. I know you, and it's what a person is, not anything he may or may not have done, that counts."

"But you don't understand, Mary. I have let you believe—"

She rose unsteadily from the bench, withdrawing her hands from his. "Let's leave to-day just as it is," she pleaded. "One thing more would spoil it. It's been so brimming full that another drop would make it spill, and maybe, who knows, we might lose something of its fullness. It's all been wonderful. 'The year's at the spring, and day's at the morn.' There's Nancy moving away from the piper's window. I am going now."

She bent swiftly and, with a quick, impulsive gesture, touched her lips to his forehead. "Good-night," she said.

He put out a hand to detain her, but she brushed past him.

He caught his breath sharply at the radiance of her voice, as she moved, a silhouetted figure, up the garden path.

He could not have told how long he sat just where she left him, his face dropped to his hands. With all his scorn for himself, he was thrilled by the thought of her love and of what it would mean to him if he had the right to accept it. It was the love that, when a boy, he had dreamed of some day knowing, the love that years later he had even doubted the existence of. And it had come to him now all unworthy of its glory from her who knew how to love greatly and to give her love without restraint. What a gift it was! And it had never occurred to him that she could ever care for him like that.

All unaware of what was happening, they had grown into each other's lives so deeply that the wrench away was going to cost them pain. Mary Malvern hurt, pained again, and through him!

"My God, what have I done to her!" he groaned in an agony of remorse. It was not the piper but himself who had been blind. What was it Uncle Gabriel had said—something about there being a lamp within her—about wondering what would happen if anybody should ever put the lamp out?

He started up from the bench, strode through the fir grove, and out to the mountain road. But he was thinking of another road, a wood-road, dark, except where a shaft of moonlight penetrated the interlacing branches of the trees. He was walking down it when he saw her coming toward him, swaying with the burden she was carrying. The moonlight scintillated oddly in her loosened hair and formed of it a kind of silvery halo. She saw him and, with a tender smile, held out the sleeping child to him. As the vision faded into obscurity, her name reached his lips in a poignant cry while he groped his way through the darkness.

Up in the piper's room, Mary Malvern stole about on tiptoe, doing a few necessary things before leaving him for the night to the care of Nancy. She crossed the hall to the east room and looked out to where the Glory Trail over Sunrise Mountain lay buried in the night shadows, the old crooked, alluring trail that, when she was a little girl, her feet had ached to climb because, if followed far enough, it led on and away to the cities of men where she would find her place in the world, her happiness. But she had not gone and now everything that was worthwhile in life had come down the trail to her. How strange life was; how beautiful! What could he have to tell her to-morrow? It was something that had restrained and silenced him. But what could it matter? What could anything matter now that the wondrous revelation had come to her? She knelt for a minute by the half-open window, resting her head on her arms. What a sweet, still night it was! A brisk wind blew the masses of her shadowy hair about her and ruffled the lace at her throat and sleeves. To-morrow, to-morrow! It seemed a long time to the morning that would bring him back to her.

She stole across the hall into the piper's room and bent over him. He was breathing evenly and the lines of pain in his face were softened. She kissed him gently, smoothing his hair from his forehead. Autumn was on its way but, for all its purple mists and yellowing leaves, the piper would be playing Pippa's hopeful song of spring.

From her overflowing heart the song surged to her lips. "The year's at the spring; the year's at the spring." She hummed the words over and over as she lay in her bed, looking out at the steadily burning stars, too immeasurably happy to fall immediately asleep.

XV

The scanty morning mail had been delivered and Uncle Gabriel, having conveniently dropped his rôle of postmaster and assumed that of proprietor, was attending to the somewhat uncertain wants of Mrs. Eustasia Whitcomb, who was engrossed in trying to make a decision between two patterns of cretonne.

"It takes Eustasia half a day to make up her mind which of two things she wants," he had once told his wife, when he had been reprimanded by her for his tardy arrival home, "and then, I vum, if she don't go off without either, saying that she'll think about it and return when she has arrived at a decision."

To-day, however, was an exception, for having scrutinized each pattern from the right and the wrong side, and taken them to the window to see which looked better in the sunlight, Eustasia decided in favor of the cerise and gray pattern, not, however, without some misgivings as to the wisdom of her choice.

"How is Mary Malvern's boy getting on?" she asked as Uncle Gabriel's rusty shears, accompanied at each click by a sidelong contortion of his mouth, made their uneven way across the cretonne, lopping off rose-garlands of unrivalled brightness, and gay-winged songsters the like of which had never been seen on or off the mountain.

"Fine as a fiddle, thanks to Dr. Gordon," responded the old man.

"I have searched from garret to cellar among my old papers and can't find the paper I'm looking for, but, somewhere, I am positive that I read some kind of a scandal about a Dr. Gordon. It isn't likely that there are two such big surgeons by the same name, is it?"

She eyed him quizzically as if she might be prying into the obscurest corner of his mind in an effort to discover something hidden there, and drag it forth to the light.

"There's one pile I haven't untied yet; I'm hoping that it will be there, and I'm going home to look for it so I'll bid you good-morning," she said, taking the parcel from his hands.

"Did you forget something?" he asked, as, presently, that lady reappeared in the doorway, puffing from the exertion of mounting the piazza steps.

She beckoned to him excitedly. "Do come here, Gabriel Bent, as fast as you can. Who do you suppose it can be?"

By the time he reached her, a dark red roadster had rolled up to the steps and the chauffeur was opening the door of the car.

"Can you tell me where I can find Dr. Gordon?" inquired the portly gentleman beside him, directing his question to Uncle Gabriel, who stood peering inquisitively over his narrow spectacles.

"Well, he's living in a sort of shack some two miles up along the mountain," he replied with an uncertain jerk of his thumb, that might have been taken to point in any one of the four directions or generously to include them all.

"I doubt if you could make it in that," he added, casting a deprecatory glance at the richly appointed car. "It's a steep, stony road. But I shouldn't wonder if you found Mr. Gordon at Mary Malvern's place. Anyway, you had better try there first. He is looking after a sick boy up there."

"And the Malvern place?" asked the chauffeur, a big,

genial-looking fellow with flaming hair, and bright blue eyes.

"Take your first turn to the right, and then go straight. You won't go very straight either for the road is uncommon crooked. It's a cottage house, white, with a wide porch covered with vines. There's a big old-fashioned garden in front. Mary sets great store by her flowers. And there's a white picket fence around the garden and a cherry tree near the gate," finished Uncle Gabriel, in a last attempt to make his directions explicit.

"Thank you, sir," nodded the portly gentleman, a trifle impatiently.

"It sets all by itself near a big clump of fir trees, come to think of it; it's the first house you come to so, I vum, you couldn't miss it anyway."

"I should say not," agreed the driver with a hearty laugh as he shut the door and released his brakes. "They're the plainest directions I've ever gotten yet."

"Ask them what they want Dr. Gordon for," prompted Mrs. Whitcomb in Uncle Gabriel's ear as he was turning to enter his store.

"Eustasia's got her mind on that pesky newspaper," thought he to himself, but he obliged her by asking, although rather feebly, "There isn't any bad news for him, is there? We all think considerable of Mr. Gordon up here."

"Oh, not at all," impersonally, "but we are very anxious to find him."

With a curt "good-morning" from him and an expansive smile from the big, jovial chauffeur, Uncle Gabriel and the astonished Eustasia were left staring after the car as it disappeared in a cloud of dust.

"About the finest turnout I've ever seen around these parts," he observed casually, relighting his pipe.

"Did you notice the initials on the door—D. H. G.?"

"No; my eyesight ain't so keen as it used to be. The details sort of slip by me."

"Who do you suppose they are?" she exclaimed, when the car was a flying dot in the distance. "That stout gentleman needn't have been so crusty. Well, I must hurry for after dinner I'm going to have Silas drive me right up to Mary's. I want to carry Peter Piper a jar of currant jelly," she explained with unwonted sympathy as her eyes met his comprehending smile. "And I'm going to look in that last pile of papers, too. I believe in having everything open and above board."

"That's right; stir up as much strife as you can. By the way, I suppose those cars like they were in are as common in Boston as wheelbarrows are round here, aren't they?"

If he meant to soothe her ruffled feelings, his purpose failed, for without answering him, she gathered up her voluminous skirt and passed majestically down the steps.

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"Why couldn't he have said the first house after the turn and been done with it, Clem?"

"Guess he likes to hear himself talk," replied the driver, with a wide grin.

"It seems to me we are a long time getting there," remarked the other testily, "but I shouldn't advise you to go any faster. I feel as if there were nothing left of me but skin and bones after bouncing over these infernal roads. What do you say, Clem?" more cheerfully, as a sharp turn in the road brought a white cottage into view. "Do I seem to be falling away?"

Without looking up from his wheel, the young man addressed gave a spontaneous answer. "I should say if you were asking for my opinion, Dr. Prince, that you were holding your own pretty well but not resting very comfortable."

The doctor threw back his head in a hearty laugh. "Well,

that's a pretty favorable report, nevertheless, I think you'll have to take me out on a stretcher, I'm that cramped. Sightly location, this," he exclaimed as Sunrise Mountain in all its glory loomed into view.

"Patience, Doctor, we're making it. There's the fir grove. Looks as if the white house had been dropped right into the middle of it—vines climbing over the porch, garden of flowers, cherry tree by the gate," he said, running over all the items of identification that the old man had given them, "and, I vum," in close imitation of his drawl, "the first house on the road so we sure couldn't miss it. Do you think this could possibly be it?" he inquired, bringing the car to a sudden stop. "Ah, there's the lady herself in the garden, with streaks of sunlight in her hair. I'll get out and inquire for him."

"We are looking for Dr. Gordon," he called, swinging in long, even strides up to the garden gate.

She came down the path, her arms full of purple, and yellow flowers, to the picket fence, at which he stood smiling genially, his cap in his hand.

"The storekeeper thought he might be here," he explained with an expectant glance at the door of her house.

"I'm sorry," she said, in a voice that, like her eyes, had streaks of sunlight in it, "but he isn't here."

"Then you think that he might be at his shack? According to the old gentleman it's a perilous trip up there but, after coming so far, we're prepared to risk it."

"I don't know whether he is or not. His shack is a mile from here and Uncle Gabriel wasn't far from right. I don't believe you could make it in your car. You could climb up more easily. He is sure to be here before long, I think. Why don't you wait for him here?"

"I'll ask the party out there," he said, nodding over his shoulder, "and see what he says. Thank you."

There was a brief conversation at the door of the car, after

which the young man returned, followed by "the party," whom she had heard gruffly refuse to stir one rod farther.

"I am exceedingly anxious to find Dr. Gordon," he declared, plainly irritated, "but I positively will not be tortured another mile over these infernally rough roads to see anybody. Roads! They are more like cowpaths!"

He was not half so bad as he sounded; he was used to having his way and not being thwarted in his desires and he had come, probably at great expense of time and strength, to save the piper. At once her heart warmed to him.

"The roads aren't much to boast of," she agreed, "and you have come over them a very long way to help us. Do sit here and rest and look at the mountains. Perhaps they'll almost help you to forget the roads. They have never looked so beautiful as they do to-day."

Her voice, deep with gratitude and warm with suppressed emotion, compelled him to glance more than casually at the face above the huge bouquet of flowers. It was a face that one might like to look at long, to study, he thought; perhaps, even to paint. It would be worth all an artist's endeavor to bring out the almost mystical beauty of her countenance. Afterwards, he noticed that her hair, as Clem with a touch of Irish sentiment had observed, was streaked with sunlight and that her eyes, which were singularly dark and glowing, were full of depth and distance.

What was it the old postmaster had called her—Mary Malvern? And it was to save her boy that Gordon had sent for him.

"Come up to the house, both of you," she invited eagerly. "I feel sure that he will be here soon."

"I should like to have a smoke right here on the porch and, maybe, after Clem has rested a bit, he will do a little reconnoitering for us."

She left them together on the piazza for a few minutes

after which she returned with a plate of fresh gingerbread and glasses of ice-cold milk.

"This is most kind of you," said the doctor, taking the tray from her hands and setting it on the small table which stood near him. "Now, if only Gordon would show up, everything would be complete."

"He was here this morning early but I was away on an errand. You see, he wasn't expecting you and he may have gone fishing for an hour or two or off on a hike."

"Clem here ought to be put on the detective force. I won't weary you by going into the details of his finding me; sufficient to say that he did. There was a wreck on the railroad last night—freight cars—so the early train was blocked, couldn't get through; hence, our motoring up. That's the whole story briefly. Now, I fancy, you have one to tell."

"I knew, of course, the minute I saw the car that you were Dr. Prince," she replied, "and I can't tell you—"

"Don't try to," broke in the doctor brusquely. "I dare say we shall have quite a pleasant holiday out of this if only Gordon will put in his appearance. But you have interesting things to tell me I want to hear."

"Somehow I knew when I saw you that you must have heard about everything—all about Dr. Gordon, I mean," she said with a slight lift of her chin and an unmistakable note of triumph in her voice.

"Yes, we heard all about it somewhere the other side of the post office, where we stopped for some water to cool the engine. I suppose that Gordon is the talk of the town. I was brought up in a little village. I know how they are. The boy is yours, isn't he?"

"No, he isn't mine. He is here because the people with whom he lives happen to be away."

"And he is coming on all right?"

"Yes, he seems to be. Dr. Gordon is very hopeful."

There were minutes of silence before the doctor spoke again. And, in the interim, Mary Malvern, without looking at him, was conscious that his eyes were upon her in a kind but scrutinizing gaze.

"There is only one thing I need to ask you," he said at length. "I know that he couldn't have failed. But you don't think that the strain may have unnerved Dr. Gordon, that he may have gone to pieces after it?"

"I am sure not. He was here last evening." Something in her voice made both men look up.

At the remembrance of those last few minutes in her garden, the color flooded up into her face. "He was all right, I am quite sure," she said.

"He was tired, I take it, but not, well, not shot up."

"No, he was quite himself."

Nancy hadn't said but that he looked all right when he called early in the morning to see the piper, and she would have been sure to notice if he hadn't, for her eyes were very shrewd.

"I believe that he has saved himself as well as the piper."

"You know then?" he flashed at her.

"Yes, he said that he must tell me."

"And, knowing, you dared to take the chance?" he queried.

"Knowing Dr. Gordon, yes," she answered quietly. "I didn't feel that I was taking any chance with him."

"There's no sign of him yet," announced Clem, his eye on the uphill road. "I'll take a run up to his shack, I guess, and see if I can find him."

"That's a good idea and while you are gone, with Miss Malvern's permission, I'll take a peep at this little boy of hers."

She was waiting for the doctor at the foot of the stairs when, a few minutes later, he came down from the piper's room.

"That's a fine piece of work of Dr. Gordon's," he announced briefly, "and the boy seems to be coming on all right. Do you know, Miss Malvern, I don't believe that any village gossip ever burned to spread a tale abroad as much as I do to get back to town and circulate this piece of good news. For it will be good news to the professional world. When I urged Dr. Gordon to get away, I was not thinking only of him but of the world itself that couldn't spare him. I fancy that he didn't tell you very much of what he went through. It wouldn't be like him to do that. It was simply a matter of his having gone beyond the length of his rope. He never knew how to spare himself and nobody, of course, spared him. I am not exaggerating when I tell you that professionally he was the king of us all, and an authority in his line of surgery. All of Howard's damnable newspaper talk wouldn't have influenced him at all if he had been himself. It was the consciousness that he had really failed that killed him, and he was too worn out to realize that brain fag and physical exhaustion were responsible for his failure. Anyway, the long battle is over now, and I take it that you have helped, well, not a little."

"No, I only did what anybody, knowing him, would have done, believed in him."

He did not contradict her, but he had his own thoughts about her part in the victory.

As they talked, she could see that he was taking in with an accuracy of observation every detail of her living room, into which she had led him. She was aware, however, that his glance stopped suddenly at the gate-legged table, on which lay a half-smoked briar pipe and a man's handkerchief.

"You and he have become good friends," he remarked meditatively, turning towards her.

"Yes, his coming has meant everything to the piper and me," she answered, meeting his direct gaze frankly.

It did not then occur to her that he might be wondering just how much she and Gordon had come to mean to each other. But the lines about his firm mouth became perplexed, and deepened as he thought of the two—Daniel Gordon and this woman of the hills. He did not once doubt his friend, but he had come to know this Mary Malvern at the loneliest moment of his life when both wife and friend had failed him and when life itself seemed to be slipping out of his grasp. She had freely given him her friendship and had believed in him to the utmost. There was no reason for supposing that there existed between them anything more than a fine, frank comradeship except that her face lighted, when she spoke of him, with a beautiful radiance. And this was, perhaps, only natural, considering what he had just done for the boy, whom she seemed to love as if he were her own.

But, as he looked at her, the irritating thought persisted in his mind, nor was he able to dismiss it readily. What could be more natural than for them to have come to love each other? And yet—

“It’s the mountains that have helped him most,” she was saying.

His glance followed hers out the low, wide, open doorway to the long chain of hills over which the noonday sunlight poured its dazzling splendor.

Dr. Bailey called to see Peter Piper, but Gordon did not come and Clem returned to report that he had scoured the country round, but could find no trace of him.

“I don’t wonder that he is content to stay up here,” he remarked, dropping to the doorstep. “Lakes, and brooks, and mountains all thrown in. Every curve you turn shows up a grander picture than the one before. I wish that he would come.”

Mary Malvern wished so, too, and an hour later, when there were still no signs of him, she excused herself and hur-

ried up the trail to his shack, not once stopping on the steep climb to catch her breath until she reached the fir-encircled clearing from which, through tall, straight lines of beech trees, she could glimpse the log house with its big red chimney.

The half-open door suggested that, if he were not there, he had not gone away for long. She knocked twice and, when he did not answer, called his name. How still it was! Not a sound but the shrill hum of the locusts in a near-by meadow. With a feeling of apprehension, she pushed the door wide open and stepped within.

He was not there, but his coat and cap hung from a peg on the wall, and an open magazine, turned face down, lay on the table beside his easy chair. In front of the brick fireplace was the big braided rug that she had sent up to him from her attic to make his room look a little more cozy and homelike.

"Every fireplace should have a braided rug," she told him when he came to thank her for her gift.

She sank down wearily upon it now and rested her head against the arm of his chair, overpowered by a vague foreboding that some harm had come to him. It came to her how exacting Dr. Prince had been in questioning her, how quizically his keen eyes had studied her from beneath their shaggy eyebrows. Could there have been in his mind some grave concern for Dr. Gordon that she didn't know anything about? And what else could Daniel Gordon have had to tell her last night about himself? She blamed herself now for not having allowed him to finish what he had begun to say. But she had been too supremely happy for another word. She had been jealous of her happiness, had wanted to hoard it like a miser, had been fearful that it was only elusive, transient, and would escape her.

But now a new fear presented itself that, in its intensity,

blotted out every other. Her own happiness was nothing. It was his that was at stake. And supposing, after the tremendous strain he had been under, he had felt the need of her, had struggled to make her understand—. And she had failed him! Dr. Prince had said something about a mental and physical reaction. Her mind, which had been at high tension and which had scarcely relaxed since the piper's accident, at once pictured Gordon in a half dozen places of peril.

But she was not often given to morbid reflections, and she tried with all her strength of will to shake them from her now. Presently he would come and they would both smile at all her foolish fears and imaginings. Probably, after assuring himself that the piper was all right, he had gone fishing. She snatched at any clue that might explain his absence and relieve the tension of her anxiety.

She knew where he kept his rods and lines and went to look for them, hoping against hope to find them gone. They were all there in the corner. The sleeve of her dress caught on one of them and it fell against the cretonne curtain that partitioned off his bedroom from the rest of the house. With a quick gesture of despair, she brushed the curtain aside. The quiet order of the little room seemed, for the time being, to restore her peace of mind and she stood for a few moments perfectly quiet, her hand resting on his pillow.

There was a chance that he had gone to the post office and would ride home with Uncle Gabriel when he came to dinner. Wherever he was, there was nothing to be gained by her staying there. She pulled back the curtain, walked across the living room, her arms hanging limply, and out the door, leaving it just as she had found it, half open.

She sat down on the doorstep and waited for him a few minutes longer. She was deceived half a dozen times into thinking that he was coming, by the snapping of a dry twig

or the scampering of a squirrel through the branches of a tree. Once she was so sure of footsteps that she sprang to meet him, her face brightening with relief. But she was disappointed again for there wasn't anyone coming or any other sound but the wind shaking the leaves of the trees.

"Oh, if only I could pull you down and look over the rim of you," she cried impulsively, flinging out her arms to the mountains that on all sides towered precipitously over the sturdy log shack.

Her call started a thin echo among the hollows. At the sound, she glanced nervously over her shoulder, then broke into a little troubled laugh. It was as if, she reflected, she were this morning discovering a new self that she could neither be certain of nor understand.

With the renewed anxiety that the disappointment of not finding him had brought her, she began, with many backward glances, the descent of the trail. At the clearing, from which by standing on an old tree stump she could see the fork in the roads below, she stopped to look anxiously for signs of Uncle Gabriel and Old Hundred. But the two roads stretched idly away with nobody in view. He must have gone for, with all allowance for Old Hundred's sluggishness and his master's proclivity to loiter at every opportunity for a possible chat, it was more than time for him to be at the two-notched road.

Back in her kitchen, it was a relief to her to have something for her hands to do. She busied herself preparing dinner and left her work only now and then to run up to Peter Piper's room or to speak to Dr. Prince and Clem on the porch.

"Dinner is very late," she said on one of her flying visits from the kitchen. "But it will be ready before long now. Perhaps, if we all stop looking for Dr. Gordon, he will come. I've been up to his shack; he isn't there and I don't know

how we can find him. He often goes down to the store and rides back with the postmaster. If Uncle Gabriel has seen nothing of him, I shall be worried."

"Frankly, Miss Malvern, I think we have nothing to worry about, not unless he's gone off exploring and gotten lost. It's you yourself that we should be concerned about. I'm afraid that we are putting you to a great deal of trouble."

"But you are not," she assured him. "I wish that you were. I should like to be put to trouble for you."

"Don't be too grateful to me for coming up here. It's been worth it just to hear the joyful news about Gordon first hand, and," he added, "to see that picture yonder," pointing across the field. "I had no idea of the beauty of these hills of yours."

Her hills? That was the way Dr. Gordon had spoken of them, too. Why should they? She had no claim upon them nor wanted any, and they no longer had any claim upon her. For that she was entirely grateful.

"Just see the shadows on them now, Miss Malvern. But, of course, you must have seen them just like that a hundred times or more."

"Sometimes I think that they are never twice the same," she replied. "I have often wondered."

From the lake, the deep-wooded mountains, sloping away gently, rose in austerity and grandeur. Behind them towered loftier, craggier summits that lifted their acute peaks up, up to the bright blueness above, against which they presented the appearance of having been sharply and delicately etched.

"I should like nothing better than to stay here a month, but we ought to start home by three o'clock. That will give us time to reach Benton Junction by ten and we can make the rest of the trip easily the next morning. We were just twelve hours coming. But Clem did some driving."

"You couldn't stay any longer?" she asked.

"Appointment to-morrow afternoon I can't miss; absolutely unpostponable. I suppose that Dr. Gordon will be coming home soon now."

It was a statement rather than a question and he put it in much the same way as he might have said, "This is Wednesday, I believe," or as he might have made any other commonplace assertion.

Promptly at three o'clock the doctor made preparations for departure. Though disappointed, he felt perfectly at ease about going since Clem, after farther reconnoitering, had brought them tidings of Gordon. He had met down by the post office an interesting little urchin by the name of Don Quixote Skinner, who said that he had seen the doctor that morning starting off on a hike.

"He will doubtless show up the minute we are out of sight. Tell him, please, Miss Malvern," said Dr. Prince, buttoning his motor coat, "that the next time he sends for me to come on a wild goose chase, I want him to be here to receive me."

Her lips were trembling slightly when he took her hand.

"You have done a bigger thing for Dr. Gordon," he told her, his gruff voice lowered, "than you will probably ever know. Thank you for looking after us so well to-day and best wishes for your boy. I seem to persist in thinking that he is yours."

That was how the message Gordon had sent had read, "to save the boy of a very dear friend of mine." But he had understood at once, when she had told him that the piper had no folks, no anybody. It was only natural that he should have found a home within her gentle heart.

"But the Skinners are home and now he is no longer mine," was moving through her mind.

Clem raised his cap as Dr. Prince stepped into the car, then climbed in himself, and laid his big hands on the

wheel. He had released the clutch when the doctor put up his hand.

"Wait," he said. "I believe that, after all, I'll leave a note for Gordon. I've thought of something else I want to say to him and I am not going to trouble Miss Malvern with too many messages."

He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and the stub of a pencil with which he wrote hastily.

"There," he said, folding the paper and handing it to her, "please give him that."

They left her in her garden, standing between tall rows of flowers. Once the doctor turned round to wave to her, but she was looking up the mountain trail toward Gordon's shack and did not see him.

XVI

Not long after Uncle Gabriel Bent had watched the dark red roadster out of sight, he spied the voluminous figure of Mrs. Eustasia Whitcomb descending the steps of her house with more than convenient speed. As she passed by the post office, she waved something white in his direction.

"I vum, what's Eustasia waving so triumphantly?" he mused. "A flag of truce, I guess. Maybe she's going up to carry Peter Piper a glass of jelly and find out who Mary's visitors were. But no, she wouldn't be walking clear up there."

But it was no flag of truce that Eustasia Whitcomb carried as she laboriously made her way up the hill to Mary Malvern's house. And there was no glass of jelly concealed in the folds of the newspaper, the discovery of which had at last rewarded her long hours of searching in the garret.

She was out of breath from haste and excitement, but there was a smile of self-satisfaction on her placid countenance when she reached Mary's garden and eagerly opened the gate.

"Mrs. Whitcomb!" exclaimed Mary Malvern herself, coming to the door. "You didn't walk way up here, did you?"

"Yes, I did," she responded, puffing up to the porch like a disabled engine. "Silas is away to-day and so I was obliged to walk. I understand that you had company. Were you expecting visitors?" inquired Mrs. Whitcomb, entering the door that Mary Malvern held hospitably open for her.

"No, I wasn't expecting company," answered Mary, pouring a glass of lemonade for her guest, who had ensconced herself comfortably in the large easy chair by the window. "They were not my visitors, but it was a privilege to entertain them."

"Oh, not your visitors?" queried Mrs. Whitcomb with an inquiring lift in her voice and a slight quaver of her triple chin.

"No," said Mary, certain now that she knew the motive of Eustasia's call. "They came to see Dr. Gordon."

"Oh," again from the caller, but this time more pronounced and followed by a rustling of the paper in her ample lap.

"On business, I suppose?"

"Yes, at Dr. Gordon's invitation."

"It's nice for him that he can make himself so much at home here," laying a plump hand beside the briar pipe, and handkerchief on the gate-legged table.

Mary Malvern made no answer and her lips suddenly tightened in a firm, straight line.

"Well, my lady," reflected her caller, putting down her glass, "if you haven't anything to say of interest, perhaps I have something to tell you that may interest you greatly."

But she wasn't going to blurt the news out like a school-girl; instead she would work up to her climax gradually; she was going to take keen enjoyment in hurting Mary Malvern, whom everybody considered so superior. The time had come, at last, for her to assert her superiority and she did not shrink from her task.

"Hasn't it ever occurred to you," she began, "that Dr. Gordon has been rather mysterious in his relations with us?"

"Mysterious?" repeated Mary, who sat the other side of the table.

"Yes, his not telling us who he was or anything. I sus-

picion, Mary, that if you had known as much about him as I do, you wouldn't have trusted Peter Piper to his hands so readily."

"Yes, I should have believed in him just the same, Mrs. Whitcomb," she answered slowly, her restless hands the only sign of her emotion.

Her caller, quick to notice, went on leisurely, "Sooner or later, Mary, everything is bound to come out. 'Truth crushed to earth will rise again.' In His own good time the Creator brings everything to light."

"What can you mean, Mrs. Whitcomb? You can't surprise me by telling me anything about him!" broke out Mary Malyern, puzzled as to whether the woman had ferreted out by some hook or crook, something of Gordon's history or whether she were only saying what she did to ascertain certain facts about him that she felt to be in the other's possession.

"Perhaps you know all about this then!" exclaimed Mrs. Whitcomb, spreading her paper on the table.

A look of relief sprang to Mary Malvern's eyes as, with a quick glance, she took in the headline.

"Oh, yes," she surprised her caller by saying, "I knew all about that. Why, he told me about it himself. It was just this way, Mrs. Whitcomb," she told her, disturbed at having to discuss her friend and the piper's with this woman or to make any explanations about him, but desirous of correcting any false impression she might have of him through having read one of Mr. Howard's bitter attacks. There was no end to the talk she would make unless she were at once set right. Even so, one could not be sure of her. But through what trick of fate had the paper fallen into her hands she wondered.

"Dr. Gordon," she said, forcing herself to composure, "after years of the hardest kind of work and the severest

mental strain, suffered a complete nervous breakdown. The failures you read about here were a result of that, nothing else. The fact that he has saved Peter Piper is proof enough that he is entirely himself again. And isn't it wonderful to think that he has regained his strength here in our own mountains! Let me tear the paper and let us both forget it as he has tried to forget that sad chapter of his life that, after all, has had such a happy ending."

Her caller's disagreeable purpose had been thwarted by Mary's pale tranquillity, but she had one final thrust in reserve which, she felt, would carry home.

"Since the doctor has made such a confidante of you," she said, drawing herself up exultantly and turning the paper over with affected carelessness to the full-length picture of a tall girl in a beautiful lacy gown and a wide-brimmed, drooping hat, "he has doubtless told you all about his lovely wife —Clarice I believe her name is. Rather pretty, don't you think? She seems to be quite a social butterfly."

Her sharp eyes were on Mary's face to note the effect of her words. Unless she were greatly mistaken, there was one chapter of his life the doctor had neglected to give his friend. If so, she had not had her long, warm climb for nothing.

If Mary Malvern had been at all dramatic, she might have defeated her caller's aim to the very end. But she had no instinct for the dramatic and it was with eyes of frank amazement and incredulity that she looked up from the picture. Her face was an open book for Eustasia Whitcomb to read the pained surprise written there. But the latter's moment of triumph was as fleeting as it was complete, and the wave of jubilation that surged through her, quickly gave place to one of honest concern. There was something about the whiteness of Mary Malvern's face, the sudden fading of the light from her eyes that at once startled and alarmed her. She had never heard of any heart affection in the Malvern

family. But Mary looked like death. What if she should die right here in her presence! At any rate, she had only done her Christian duty. It was high time that this too credulous woman was told the truth, and, if Providence had seen fit to make her the messenger of it, it was not for her to try to escape her duty whether unpleasant or otherwise. But if only Mary would say something and not sit there as white and dumb as if she had been turned to marble.

"It wasn't much that I saw about her," she remarked to relieve the tension of the moment, "just two or three little items. Here, your hand is shaking. If you must have them, let me read them to you."

The paper slipped to the floor, but Mrs. Whitcomb picked it up and read, although not at all in the manner she had, on her way to Mary Malvern's, pictured herself as doing:

"Dr. and Mrs. Daniel Gordon were week-end guests of Mr. and Mrs. Fred Merriwether at their newly acquired country estate, Idlewild."

"Clarice Gordon has been chosen Queen of the May for the May Day festival."

"Doesn't look more than nineteen, does she, with her short hair, and short dress, and those pretty ribbons?"

"It doesn't pay to have too much faith in people, Mary. You see what's come of all this. But now that you do know, you can profit by your mistake, and you can make amends for the past by showing him his place. Experience is a hard teacher, but we all live to learn, the best of us."

"But I must believe in him," said Mary Malvern in a voice that seemed quieter than silence.

"Then you are flying in the face of Providence and let me tell you, Mary Malvern, that for all your family, and your talents, and your looks, your name isn't above reproach, and his calling here so frequently hasn't gone without notice and comment. I am in a position to know whereof I speak. If you

believe in him, you are just as evil as he is. But I have done my duty and I'll wash my hands of the whole affair." And so saying, she gathered her satin skirts about her, and, without another word, swept out of the house and went rustling down the garden path.

Mary Malvern was sitting rigidly silent just where her caller had left her, with her head bowed on the table, when, a half hour or more later, Uncle Gabriel called to inquire for Peter Piper.

"You are just about beat out, aren't you, Mary?" he said, kindly, laying his hand on her shoulder.

He was startled at the ghostlike face she raised to him.

"There, there, Mary, I'm going right up and get Mother,"—"Mother" in his opinion being the panacea for every ill. "You look dreadfully upset, child."

Something between a sob and a cry escaped her.

"No, don't, Uncle Gabriel, I want to stay alone. I haven't had a minute all day to think. Just let me stay here by myself," she begged wearily.

She looked and sounded so unlike herself that the old man was filled with anxiety for her. "The boy is all right, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Dr. Gordon has been here, of course?"

There was the fraction of a minute's pause before she answered, "Yes, early this morning, Nancy says."

"Eustasia Whitcomb happened to be at the store when those friends of the doctor's called, and she's been pestering me ever since, trying to find out who they are. She didn't happen around with some currant jelly for Peter Piper, did she? It ain't much loss if she didn't because it's sourer than lemons, not much like Mother's. I guess she must have been writing a poem when she made it and forgot to put in the sugar."

"She called this afternoon, but I don't remember of her saying anything about currant jelly."

"No wonder you're tired if she has been pestering you. It seems sometimes as if I'd have to give up the post office. She's such a nuisance, running over every time she sees anybody come into the store. Eustasia's what you might call 'instant in season and out of season,' but mostly out of season, I guess."

"They waited for him until three o'clock," she said, rising from her chair and crossing the room unsteadily to the window. "One was Dr. Prince, whom Dr. Gordon sent for, and the other, the chauffeur."

"I surmised as much, but I didn't let on; thought it was nobody's business and knew it would soon be everybody's if she got hold of it."

"I can't see," she broke out suddenly, turning toward the old man her white, troubled face, "where he can be. I am afraid that he has gone off on some new trail and lost his way, or maybe something worse has happened," she added as a vision of Gordon, asleep on the edge of the cliff, presented itself to her distracted mind. "If only I knew where to find him, but I don't and it will soon be dark."

She sounded so much like a child in distress that his heart overflowed with pity and concern for her. "Now see here," he said in comforting tones as she sank into a chair by the window and sat looking out vacantly toward the hills, "you are all beat out, and so you've gotten wrought up over nothing. He called this morning and when he found that the piper was coming on all right, he knew that he could trust him to the nurse and Dr. Bailey during the day and he probably went off on a little holiday. I dare say he got back late to his shack this afternoon and will be down right after supper. He wouldn't likely drop in just at supper time. If you go off hunting him up, like enough he'll come while

you are gone and you'll miss each other. Suppose you just stop looking for him. You know the old saying, 'A watched pot never boils.' "

Her concern for Gordon strengthened his conviction that the "boys" were not far astray in their conjecture that the doctor and Mary were more to each other than ordinary friends, and in his loyal old heart, which had no misgivings for her future happiness now that it lay in Gordon's keeping, he secretly rejoiced.

"Perhaps you are right, Uncle Gabriel," she said, getting up from her chair. "I am so tired that I can't think straight. I wouldn't be so worried, but there's something else, something I can't tell you about."

"Don't try to; your Uncle Gabriel understands. I almost forgot this," he exclaimed, drawing a paper bag from his pocket. "I had a new lot of lollipops come in to-day, bright colored ones. I thought maybe he could play with them if he couldn't eat any of them yet."

Mechanically she took the bag from his hand and laid it on the table. "Uncle Gabriel, I want you to let me get supper for you. It will give me something to take up my mind. And then I want you to do something for me. I guess Aunt Martha won't worry about you."

While she was setting the table, the old man kept up a steady flow of conversation with the purpose of diverting her mind, if possible, from whatever was troubling her. He was not at all sure that she heard all or even anything that he said, but, nevertheless, he did not flag in his efforts.

"It's queer where those Skinners cleared out to for so long," he remarked as she poured his tea. "One thing, the neighborhood has had quite a spell of peace. I suppose that Peter Piper will have to go back there as soon as he is able."

"How short the days are getting," she remarked irrele-

vantly. "The dark seems to shut us in all at once. If he doesn't come very soon, would you mind driving up for Aunt Martha? I am going out somewhere to look for him. I can't wait any longer!"

She spoke with such quiet determination that the old man knew that, for the present at least, there was no use of his trying to dissuade her. He would take his time over his supper and, meanwhile, the doctor would probably come, he concluded with his usual optimism.

"Sure, I will," he responded briskly. "Old Hundred needs a little extra exercise. He's getting kind of skittish lately for him. I'll drive up to the shack, too. We'd do most anything for you, Mary. I don't know how we should get along if you should ever leave the mountain."

"I am never going to leave the mountain."

"Maybe other folks might have different plans for you," he contradicted kindly, beaming across the table at her. "Mother and I would be the first, dear, to wish you happiness. You almost seem like our own and we are very fond of the doctor."

The wave of color that crimsoned her face confirmed Uncle Gabriel's suspicions.

"The best is none too good for you, Mary, after all you've been through and—"

"You didn't think—that, did you?" she cried, her face paling. "You haven't thought that Dr. Gordon, that I—Oh, tell me that you haven't," she entreated, her breath coming and going in quick, hard gasps, her hands clutching the table. "Tell me that nobody has said, has thought that!"

"The fact is, dear," he answered, perplexed by her emotion, "the boys at the store—"

She stopped him with a protesting hand from saying any more.

"They thought that I was going to marry Dr. Gordon?" she asked, bringing out the words with great effort.

He nodded affirmation.

"It doesn't make any difference to me what anybody says or thinks. Nothing matters any more except that I want him to come."

"Things will all look brighter to you after a good night's rest," he encouraged, trying to speak lightly, but wishing with all his heart that he had followed Martha Ann's advice and kept his tongue between his teeth. There were in his mind disquieting misgivings that she might not approve of his having quoted to Mary the opinions of his talkative friends.

"I'll go up along now and see if I can't round him up, Mary, and in the future if anyone so much as mentions your name at the store, I'll squelch them good and proper. I can all right. The boys will take anything from me. I'll be back before long, Old Hundred permitting."

When he had driven off with a cheery wave of his hand, she went upstairs to her room and sat down to wait. From across the narrow hall she could hear the piper's even breathing. Her nerves were so tense and quivering she wondered if they would ever let her sleep again. With all her heart, she wished that she could fall asleep and wake up to find that yesterday's and to-day's happenings had been nothing but a frightful dream.

It was not warm, but the atmosphere of the room was stifling to her and she quietly raised the window. A light wind, that had about it a touch of autumn spiciness, blew the muslin draperies about her head and shoulders as she sat, motionless, staring out into the dusky fir grove. Beyond the fir trees, the night shadows were darkening the Glory Trail where, she remembered with a throb of anguish, the morning sunlight had shone with such alluring splendor.

Ever since Mrs. Whitcomb's call, her mind had seemed to be empty of all thought and feeling, and she was now experiencing much the same sensations of re-awakening as she had once felt when she was a little girl and had begun to "come to" after she had fallen from a ladder and lain for a long time unconscious on the ground.

It was only last night that she had been so sure of life, so glad of it. Nothing that it had in store for her, whether joy or pain, could greatly matter so long as it left her the certain shelter of his love. And in this thought she felt a sense of security and peace. In remembering her quick response to him, she suffered no pang of humiliation. She had not doubted his love any more than she now doubted that he had never meant to reveal it to her.

Since Eustasia Whitcomb's call, she had been held by a complexity of emotions, but now, in her longing for him, they had resolved themselves into one, a fear for his safety that drove every other thought from her mind. Could he have suffered a lapse of memory and lost his way?—People did sometimes after severe mental strains—in such case, he might have wandered through the woods to the falls. But no; the idea was ridiculous; nothing like that could have happened to one as strong as he. But why didn't Uncle Gabriel come back? At every sound she started forward, listening for the creaking of wheels and Old Hundred's unmistakable shamble. There was a sound now, but it was only the nurse moving quietly down the stairs.

Unable any longer to stand the awful quiet of her room, she tiptoed across the hall to Peter Piper and sat down beside him. He roused uneasily and muttered something between closed lips. It was comforting to hear his voice, thin and muffled as it was.

"The flute is on the table, right by the bed, dear," she

whispered, reaching for his hand. "I put it there so that you could find it the minute you wanted to play."

He stirred and fell asleep, his warm hand in her cold one.

Darkness came and with it the guttural croaking of the frogs and the harsh, dissonant cry of the katydids. A whip-poorwill flew back and forth across the field snapping out, with more than usual zest, his imperative, melancholy song. Little fleeting gusts of wind went sighing among the pine trees, through which could be glimpsed a streak of gold where the moon was trying to break through.

The nurse, coming back upstairs with a light, urged her to lie down and rest. But for her, rest was impossible and she returned to the silence and darkness of her room. Oh, would he never come!

There was a step on the porch. At once she knew it for his.

The sense of relief that his coming brought left her weak and trembling. Her heart was in her throat, her lips dry as she rose from her chair and started for the stairs.

"You!" she breathed in a whisper that was a cry. "I'll come in a minute. I have been sitting up here near the piper."

On her way through the kitchen she stopped for a match. She wished that she didn't have to light the lamp. But she made her way resolutely to the table, removed the lampshade and lighted the wick with steady fingers.

Gordon had crossed the room, and stood directly in the lamp's glow. She took a step forward, but started back at sight of him and caught her breath sharply. In his face were deep lines she had not seen before and there was a grayness about him that to her tired eyes seemed to enfold him like a ghostly mist and put him beyond her reach. For several seconds they stood looking at each other without a word. Gordon was the first to speak.

"You are very tired, Mary," he said in a kind, deep voice.

Her eyelids quivered as though the tears had suddenly risen.

"I have been waiting for you all day," she murmured.

"I was afraid that you would wonder. It's been a very long day, hasn't it?"

"It has been an eternity."

"Yes, as long as that."

There was another moment of silence. Then, "You haven't eaten a thing all day, have you?" she asked, forced into speaking by the gauntness of his face.

"No, I believe that I haven't," he answered absently. "I haven't thought much about eating."

"Then you are going to before either of us says another word," she cried, relieved to find something for her hands to do.

Despite his earnest protest, she flew to the kitchen, from which he heard presently the clink of china, the teakettle's rhythmic hum, and the sound of her light footsteps hurrying to and fro.

"I can't let you wait on me this way," he remonstrated from the doorway. "That's what everybody says, isn't it—they mustn't let you—and then they let you go right on doing things. I want to talk to you, Mary; when I get up to the shack, I'll eat something."

"But I shall not listen," she answered from the pantry in her usual quiet voice, "not until you have eaten everything that I am going to bring you."

He sat down in the easy chair by the fireplace where he had so many times talked and read with her and the piper, and waited until she called him.

While he ate, she found something to take up her attention in the kitchen, and not until she was quite sure that he had finished his supper did she return to him.

"Mary," he began, when they were both seated in her liv-

ing room, "I have been thinking about you all day. You haven't once been out of my mind." There he stopped, unable to get any further.

"The piper is all right?" he asked after a moment.

"Yes, he's all right. But I have been afraid that you were lost."

"I came this morning when you were out. I wanted to see you and then was relieved to find you gone. I didn't think of your being worried about me all day; I might have known that you would be—about anybody," he said with something of his old smile breaking through the deep lines of his face. "I have been in the woods all day. I crossed the ravine the other side of Bear Mountain where the piper was going to take me on our next tramp. I had no idea of running away, but I had to be alone, and think, and try to straighten things out in my mind. I wanted the deep woods, and I wanted to think about you away from your physical presence."

The utter weariness of his voice, more than his ravaged face, made her aware of how greatly he had suffered.

"That was a long, hard climb," she said, struggling to speak naturally, "but isn't it beautiful there? The piper took me once."

"I wondered if you had ever been there. It was beautiful, as you say, but I didn't mean to stay there so long."

"There was a special reason for my wanting you to come. Dr. Prince and Clem have been here. They waited for you until three."

"Prince!" he exclaimed. "Prince and Clem have been here!"

"They drove up in your car. I don't know who was the more disappointed at not finding you, the doctor or Clem. Dr. Prince asked me to tell you that it was worth all the trouble of coming, to find out about you, that the piper's

operation was as fine and clean a piece of work as he had ever seen and that he would be looking for you home soon."

"It was like Prince to come. I seemed to forget that there was a chance of his getting here. I'm sorry that I wasn't here, but, after all, nothing matters now but you."

"He was thankful that he wasn't here in time. Dr. Bailey told him that he thought your being here just when we needed you was one of the strange turns of fate,—that it *was* fate," she repeated slowly, "but it seemed to me that it was not fate but—God."

"God," he echoed hoarsely, his eyes upon her illumined face. "God that sent me here!"

She did not know the truth then as he had at first feared. Thank God for that. At least, it was permitted him to tell her. Dr. Prince could have dropped no word about Clarice, else how could she be so merciful?

"Dr. Prince said that back home is your work now," she told him, speaking mechanically, he noticed, and with something gone from her voice.

"And up here, Mary, there's you!"

She shrank from his words as if he had struck her. If now he did not tell her everything, she could never believe in him or in anybody else again. Her heart was beating riotously, her pulses throbbing.

"But, Mary," he said bending toward her, "I have done a terrible thing to you, a damnable, unforgivable thing, and I am not asking for forgiveness or mercy. And the wrong is that I——"

She did not let him go on. "I know," she interrupted quickly, "all that you have to tell me, what you would have said last night if I had been willing to listen; there's no need of your telling me now. Perhaps it will save us both something if you don't."

"I only wish that I could spare you, had spared you the

necessity for this," he said, filled with compunction for her weariness. "But you must listen now; there's no other way."

"Dr. Prince left a note for you," she breathed, rising from her chair; "it's in my apron pocket up in Peter Piper's room. I'll run up and get it now."

"No, I am going up to see him in a few minutes; we'll get it then. Mary, you must hear me," he implored as she moved determinedly toward the door.

But she said that she must get the note and that anyway she wanted to see if the piper was all right.

When, a few minutes later, she came downstairs, Gordon was standing by the window that looked into the garden, his back toward the door, Eustasia Whitcomb's paper in his hand. It was open to his wife's picture.

"How did you get—this?" he asked, turning round to face her.

"Oh, that," she cried, feeling the very life go out of her as it had seemed to ebb away from her when she first saw the paper. "I thought that I had put that in the fire."

"It came to you like that," broke from him, tortured by her stricken face. "Mary, how you must despise me!"

She could not for the minute speak or even look at him. But she felt as if within her she were fighting a battle for them both, as if there were something in them both that she must not let die. She could not have told definitely what it was or even have explained the feeling beyond the fact that it seemed to buoy up her strength and fill her with a strong, indomitable courage.

"I came to you to-night," he was saying, the paper dropping from his hand to the floor, "to tell you everything, everything that I now know I should have made clear to you long ago. You will try to believe that much, won't you?"

"Why shouldn't I?" she asked.

"Why should you believe anything good of me again?"

"Because I have to, I guess; because there isn't any other way for me."

Her troubled eyes sought his.

"Don't," she pleaded, "speak of this any further. Why must you?"

"I have to say this much," he answered gently. "I believed when I came here that once I was sure of myself again, nothing could keep me from my work; then, when I knew that I was free to go, it came to me as a great revelation that nothing in life mattered so much to me as you. I have never known before a love like yours for me—I have forfeited every right to your friendship, but I love you, Mary, with all my heart. And all day, in spite of everything, I have been glorified by the thought of your love for me."

"Somehow," she said after a little, "I think it was meant that we should find each other, like this. You accepted my friendship as I did yours without asking any questions or even thinking any. There was no reason for you to tell us anything about yourself. Things just happened as they did, that's all, I think."

He knew that she was speaking for his comfort, but he was constrained to acknowledge to her what he felt to be the truth.

"Nothing ever just happens, Mary, I believe. One ought to look ahead and see."

"But neither of us dreamed of love." She paused a moment and drew in a quick breath. "When Peter Piper was hurt, I saw how much I depended upon you, how much it meant to me to have you here, and how empty my life would be when you went away. Why, it seemed that all the loneliness of the past years had been made up for in this one short spring and summer. It was as if a kind of late spring had come to me. And it was not altogether your fault that I discovered

what I did. If I hadn't happened to come out with the letter, I might never have known."

Her bravery smote him, but he could find no words with which to meet it.

They were standing together, some minutes later, at the window when the flash of a lantern attracted their attention.

"Uncle Gabriel going home from the post office," she said with a little catch in her voice. "The stories must have been unusually late to-night. He will want you to ride up home with him. See, Old Hundred has stopped at the gate and Uncle Gabriel is swinging his lantern for you. You will come down in the morning?"

"Yes, every morning as long as the piper needs me."

He would have said more, but Uncle Gabriel's quavering whistle for him cut short his words, and, regretfully, he left her, standing on the porch.

"I vum, I thought I was going to get away early to-night," complained the old man as Gordon climbed up into the buggy beside him. "But there was quite a little talk going on down at the post office. How's the boy coming on?"

"Splendidly."

"Your voice don't sound it, but I'm glad to know if he is. We'll all be pleased to hear that flute of his again. I didn't bring Mother down, as I calculated, because I caught sight of you on my way home from Mary's. Guess she didn't mind. I was in there this afternoon just after Eustasia Whitcomb went, found Mary sitting all by herself with her head on the table. She looked as if she had died. I hope she won't have such a busy day to-morrow. Anyway, I'm going to bring Mother down to help her. I thought you looked pretty much the worse for wear yourself. I vum, I hope if we all get out of this scrape all right, Peter Piper won't take it into his head to go pitching off any more cliffs. This fall of his has sort of upset everything. You will be going home before long, now

the summer is most over, I suppose," he remarked tentatively.

"Just as soon as the piper is better."

"I don't know what he and Mary are going to do without you. You couldn't guess what he said to me the other day."

"The piper is always saying the unexpected."

"'Uncle Gabriel,' says he, 'if I could have my pick of all the mothers and fathers in the world, I should take Miss Mary and Mr. Gordon.'"

The suggestion was a broad one, but Uncle Gabriel was in doubt whether the doctor caught it or not. At any rate, there was something in his voice that had not been there before, when he said, "I have thought ever since I have known them that Mary Malvern is the most beautiful mother in the world."

XVII

Radiant October sunshine flooded the mountains, which, after a night or two of frost, began to look here and there as if little bonfires had been kindled among them; days of wind and deep blue sky with low sailing clouds followed one another in rapid succession. By the middle of the month Peter Piper was able to sit up a few hours every day and he and Mary Malvern had courage now to hope that it would not be long before he would be able to take his first step.

Gordon was still at his shack, but Mary and the piper seldom saw him now that the boy was so well on his way to recovery. Once or twice he stopped at the door with something Uncle Gabriel had asked him to deliver, but, his errand done, he rarely accepted the piper's urgent invitation to come in and read with them. His old zest for fishing seemed to have left him, but he spent day after day tramping over the mountains, discovering new trails and reexploring old ones.

Mary Malvern understood the reason for his not coming to them, but the piper did not and overwhelmed her with questions that she found very difficult to answer. Several times the boy entreated her so earnestly to send for him that she was on the point of doing so, but each time she refrained with the reflection that very soon he would be gone from them forever and they might as well begin to get along without him now.

"He is here if we need him, dear," she said to the piper one

morning when he was especially disconsolate. "He told me that he should not go away until you had begun to walk again. It's nice for us to know that he is here even if we don't see him often."

"But isn't he lonesome without us?" he asked, lifting himself from the pillows which she had propped around him.

"Yes, I am sure that he is," she answered truthfully.

"Then why doesn't he come?"

But she could not tell him that.

It was everything to her to know that Gordon was there, still within reach of them. Her quiet, uneventful days with the piper were brighter for that knowledge, and the hills, flaming every day more brightly, seemed near and friendly because they held him within them. Not an evening but that, when her work was done and her reading or playing to Peter Piper concluded, she longed to fling her wide cape about her and go up the trail to his shack. But the boy, listening to her low, even voice and her quiet songs, could not know that there was any distress or tumult in her heart.

Once she did get as far as his door. He was reading by the fireplace, his hand arching his forehead, so that she could not see his face. She was at the stone step, but she let her hand slip from the doorknob, and turned away slowly. What, after all, was the use of her going in? It would only make things harder for them both.

Every day, leaving the piper to the care of Aunt Martha, she went on a long, vigorous walk, and came back refreshed, her cheeks rivaling in color the leaves and berries that were spilling from her arms. And then she had to sit down and tell him every little particular experience of her adventure—well he knew from his companionship with her that every one of Mary Malvern's walks was an adventure—about the birds that had not flown South, the alder bushes that stood

in the fields, holding up their red berries to the sky, the maple trees that looked each one like a tall banquet lamp with a steadily glowing light behind its deep rose or yellow shade—And, oh, might it be a long time off, but some night, when they were all asleep, a big wind was going to come stalking through the forest and with a whiff of his mighty breath blow every bright light out—; or how the silver rain had felt, splashing against her face; or the strong wind that had snatched out all her hairpins with its gripping fingers and blown her home in her big cape that had, she told him laughingly, seemed to billow on before her and challenge her to keep up with it. And no, she hadn't met Mr. Gordon. They never happened to take the same trail any more. But perhaps to-morrow. Who could tell but that she might see him to-morrow, she would be constrained to add, noting the piper's disappointed look.

She did not meet him the next day or the next, but the long walks with their wholesome tonic of air and sunshine were her salvation, and back from them she came each day too tired even to think and ready to fall asleep as soon as the piper's story was done.

One night, toward the last of the month, on his way home from the post office, Gordon stopped to see them for a few minutes. Before he reached the house, he heard the piper's flute playing his favorite tune, "The Year's at the Spring." The scrap of music struck him as being a bit incongruous with spring and summer gone, autumn come, and winter, as Mary Malvern had remarked with a touch of pessimism not usual with her, on its way, ready to come sweeping down over the mountains and bury them all in snow. By the time he reached the cherry tree, the music had ceased, but a low hum of voices came from the porch.

He waited a minute before opening the garden gate, thrilled at the thought of seeing her again. What would it be to watch

her eyes spring to sudden light, to hear her voice vibrate with welcome!

At the click of the gate, the piper laid down his flute and raised himself from his chair.

"It's you, Mr. Gordon," he cried, trembling from head to foot in his eagerness. "I thought you weren't ever coming again. Aunt Martha is here with me and Nancy, some of the time."

"Yes, and I began to think that I should have to send for you," said Aunt Martha, emerging from the shadows as Gordon sat down beside the boy and took both his slim hands in his.

"I didn't expect to find Aunt Martha here. Is Uncle Gabriel hidden over there in the corner?"

"Law no, I don't look for him for two hours or more yet. We thought we'd make the most of this warm day by sitting out on the porch. We'll be snowed in soon enough. Mary wants Peter Piper out in the air as much as possible."

Gordon said so little that Aunt Martha, having exhausted all the topics of conversation at her command, resorted to the two subjects of universal interest in the mountains, weather and the crops. He paid her courteous attention, even put in a question or a comment now and then, but all the time he was listening for a familiar step in the house, and at every sound he looked up to see if Mary Malvern had not come. His whole attitude was one of expectation. But she didn't come, and he wondered where she could be.

"She has gone away," said Peter Piper as readily as if the question had been put to him. "She didn't know for how long, but she said that she would be sure to come back some time."

"She has gone," repeated Gordon, doubtfully, as if he were voicing the impossible. "You mean that she has gone from the mountain!"

The boy nodded in a hopeless kind of way.

"Do you think that she will come back some time, Mr. Gordon?" he asked. "She used to tell me that some day she was going to climb up the Glory Trail and that if she liked the looks, maybe she would go down the other side. And now I'm afraid that she has gone forever. I've never told Aunt Martha about the Glory Trail," he whispered. "She might not understand. Miss Mary's been gone two days now."

Gordon could see from the boy's white, troubled face that it had been two days of torture to him.

"She didn't expect that you would worry about her, Piper. If she had, I think she wouldn't have gone and, of course, she will come back," he assured him, his arm about the boy's shoulder. "You just try to look at things sensibly now. She wouldn't have gone away without some good reason. You and I know her well enough to be sure of that. It's not being quite fair to Miss Mary, is it, not to believe in her now?"

"I didn't think of it that way. But, Mr. Gordon, you can't tell what she may have found the other side of the mountains."

"There's nothing under the sun to worry about," put in Aunt Martha's cheerful voice, "except that she has looked terribly thin and tired since Peter Piper's fall. It did seem kind of strange for her not to tell us her errand, knowing how much her Uncle Gabriel and I think of her, but it's all right and, as he said, she had some good reason for doing as she did."

"Did you know that the Skinners had been away and returned, Mr. Gordon?" she asked by way of changing the subject. "Seraphina told Gabriel they had been off camping. That's as much as anybody will ever find out about their wanderings. It's been a blessing to the neighborhood to have them gone, but now Seraphina is making up for lost time on the piano. I declare, the other day when she struck up 'Annie

'Laurie' and 'I'd lay me down and die,' Gabriel got up from the couch where he was lying and shouted at me as if he had gone out of his head, 'I vum, Mother, I wish to the land she would and without making such an everlasting racket about it.' I'll go in and light up now, I guess. Could you stay and read to him a little while, Mr. Gordon?"

"Oh, if you would!" the boy cried, his face brightening. "Aunt Martha reads sometimes, but I guess she doesn't like these stories very well. We are so far," picking up a book from the table and hurriedly fingering the leaves for the page that was turned down.

Gordon bent over the boy's chair and lifted him in his arms, carried him into the living room and laid him on the couch.

With all the old familiar things about, her books, her vases, filled with autumn leaves, her music open on the piano, a fire in the grate, and Cherry chirping in his cage, it seemed strange to Gordon not to see Mary Malvern there among them. He read until the piper fell asleep, and then went up to his shack, his mind full of thoughts of her.

The next evening, on his way up from the post office, he called to see if Mary Malvern had come home.

"We're listening for her train, Mr. Gordon," announced Peter Piper. "You are coming in again, aren't you? I knew your step."

"Yes, I'm coming in."

"When the wind is just right, you can hear the train. I think that she'll come to-night. Aunt Martha has gone to put a candle in the window looking down the hill. I have her do it every night. It means that we are watching for her to come home."

After a few minutes of eager listening, Peter Piper sat forward in breathless expectancy.

"Now, if Jed Stone drives her over in the auto, she'll be here in half an hour."

"But if it's broken down the way it generally is," observed Aunt Martha, appearing from the hall, "he'll have to take the horse and he's second only to Old Hundred for slowness, so don't look for her too soon, dearie."

When, after a long half hour, there were no signs of her, the boy remarked unsteadily, "I guess Jed must be driving the horse to-night."

Gordon and Aunt Martha exchanged glances and, after another half hour, when he rose to go, she went with him to the gate. "It doesn't seem like her to stay away so long and not send us any word," she reflected anxiously. "It's been five days now and for all I said last night, I do feel kind of worried about her. I wouldn't let him know it for worlds," with a nod toward the house, "nor Gabriel either. Law me, he sets as much store by her as if she was his own child."

"I think," he suggested in his brief way, "that, as she said, she had an errand and, knowing that you and Uncle Gabriel were taking good care of the piper, she hasn't thought it necessary to write. Something may have detained her, but she'll come as soon as she can. If we were to go out looking for her, we should only give people something to talk about and perhaps make things harder for Mary."

"What you say sounds reasonable, Mr. Gordon, and that's the way I try to think during the daytime, but when night comes on and she isn't here, things seem different and I begin to imagine that maybe she's sick and can't get home, but she was looking better when she went away than she had for a long time. We are glad that you are here. Come down as often as you can, won't you?"

He promised that he would and left her watching him from the gate as he struck out for the fir grove, his mind full of concern for Mary Malvern.

They watched for her all the next day and the next, and the day following that Gordon resolved that if she didn't come that night, he would take quiet but definite steps to find her. He thought that it was the piper's candle that sent out its feeble ray of light, as he approached her house shortly after eight o'clock, and his mind was filled with apprehension. But when he reached the door, his heart gave a sudden leap, for it was wide open and Mary Malvern herself stood there to welcome him.

"I have been home just an hour," she said. "Peter Piper has been waiting up to see you, but Aunt Martha insisted on his going to bed a few minutes ago. You can't guess how glad he was to see me!"

Her eyes were suffused with sudden tears, but there was an unmistakable lilt of happiness in her voice.

"You can stay a little while this evening, can't you?" she asked. "I want to tell you about my—adventure. It isn't a secret any longer."

"You know it's been years and years since I've been away," she told him when they were seated by her fire, "and it was just wonderful to go away and just as wonderful to come home again," spreading out her hands in the quick little gesture that was familiar to him.

As she talked, he tried to make up his mind in what way she had changed since he had seen her last, but he couldn't, except that the old wistful expression had gone from her eyes, which to-night were tenderly alight with happiness and peace.

"I have done a very silly thing," she said, "but I'm not sorry about it. I shan't ever run away again. I have come home to stay. I haven't told Aunt Martha or Uncle Gabriel my secret yet. Some day I think I shall tell Peter Piper, but I should like you to know it now."

For all that he had not been with her in her house for

weeks now, it seemed entirely natural for him to be sitting across from her low rocker, his eyes upon her face, only now that he was there again, he realized more than ever how much he had missed her in all the days that for her sake he had forced himself to stay away from her.

"Last week," she began intently, leaning forward and resting her chin on her hands, "I read in the paper that my old music teacher, the one who gave me lessons here and was going to send me to Europe, was in your city after an extended concert tour in this country and in Europe. I hadn't heard from him or seen his name in the paper for years. You may not understand, but some sudden impulse that I couldn't seem to control swept over me. I had to see him and I didn't stop to do any considering. I just made up my mind to go. Uncle Gabriel and Aunt Martha happened to be driving by, and I threw down my paper and rushed out of the door to ask them to stay here, and the next morning I started, full of hopes and fears. I wanted to see if, after all these years,—there was a chance for me."

"A chance for you?" he interrupted quietly.

"Yes, to see if I could begin all over again, late as it is, start and do all the things that he once thought I could do. When I opened the door of his shabby little studio, he was standing at the piano, bending over a pile of music, and when I saw the change in him, I wondered about myself and if he would know me."

"But he did," Gordon put in as she paused and drew in a quick breath. "You haven't changed, I know, not in the things that he would remember about you."

"Yes, he knew me. He thought, I guess, when he opened the door, that I was a pupil, and didn't look up for a minute. When he did and saw me in the doorway, he said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for me to be there, 'Why, here's Mary Malvern blown right off the mountains.'

"He played to me and I forgot everything, even the errand I had come on as I sat in his stuffy little studio on the very top floor of a dingy old building in an out-of-the-way side street.

"Years ago when he used to play to us here, I used to listen to him, my eyes big with wonder, just as the piper listens to your stories, but young as I was I sensed that there was something lacking in his music, some elusive thing that he seemed to be groping for but could not find. When he played for me the other day in his studio, I understood what had been the one thing lacking and knew that he had found it.

"When he had finished one of his own compositions, he whisked off the piano stool and in his old imperious way beckoned to me. I was standing at the window, looking down into the dim, narrow street, but he had been making me see the mountains and the sunlight, and making me hear the brooks, and birds, and the piper's flute. And I was back here with them.

"'You're miles and miles away,' he said, and the old whimsical smile was at the corners of his mouth as he shook his bushy head.

"I wished that I really were just then when he added, 'But, Mary, you have come a long way to play for me.' It seemed as if I couldn't touch the keys, but I did after a little. He crossed the room and stood by the window with his back toward the piano and when I had finished the piece he asked me to play—it was one he had taught me years before—he didn't say a word, but somehow I understood; there was no need for him to tell me. But, finally, he wheeled round. 'I know what you want me to say, Mary,' and his voice was kind, 'but you have come years and years too late.'"

For a little while only the low crackling of the birch logs disturbed the quiet of her room. Mary Malvern was back in the shabby studio with the old music master, hearing his

words that were, in a sense, like a verdict pronounced upon her. Gordon understood and was silent.

"He said," she resumed, reaching for her sewing, "that when I wrote him that I couldn't go abroad to study, he thought that a calamity had befallen me, but that now he had come to look at things in a different light. He told me that he had lost his wife and three boys in a hotel fire in Berlin, and he said that the pitiful part of it was that they all seemed almost like strangers to him, he had been with them so little. We talked until it was dark in the studio, and then he walked down those crooked flights of stairs with me and out to the sidewalk. There he took both my hands. 'Try to be contented and happy up there in your beautiful hills,' he said; 'I have had all the things I craved for you: fame, and travel, and wealth, but I've come back empty-handed now, too late to attain some things I might have had for the taking. And I have learned too late what I want you always to remember—that happiness, the deep, enduring kind, does not depend on fame or glory, or on any external thing, but springs from within, from the courage to take with a high heart whatever comes.'

"I kept repeating the words over to myself for fear I might forget them, and, when I got back to my room, I wrote them down just as he said them. They were almost like a little formula that I could keep saying over to myself to crush out my disappointment. I liked the words, 'a high heart.'"

Gordon's eyes were bent upon the fire. "But he didn't need to tell you that," he said without raising them. "That's what you have always had. It's the first thing a person sees in you—courage."

"No," she contradicted, "that's just the trouble; people have misunderstood. I've always been reaching out for what I couldn't have; crying for the moon out of reach. It seemed for the minute as if, with the closing of the door, he had shut the

world away from me, and I stood still at the corner of the street and couldn't think what car to take or where I wanted to go.

"But the next morning; no, it was in the night—the streets were empty and it seemed almost as still as the country—his words came back to me, and, somehow, they filled my heart with understanding and peace. When morning came, I was ready to come home, but on the way to the station I met an old school friend of mine, a girl who came up to Eagleville for her health and attended the academy there. She urged me to spend a few days with her. She was my best friend at the academy."

"Tell me about everything you can," he said when she paused, "the rest of the adventure, I mean."

"There isn't much to tell. I went with her to concerts, and on sight-seeing tours, and for a long sail up the river. We came home just after sunset when the sky was all mother-of-pearl, and the water, too. It was a lovely picture, like a pastel, with the pale reflection of the lights, the boats, gliding back and forth in the harbor, the tall buildings and slim spires in the distance, and the gray-blue haze, hanging like a thin cloud over the skyline. It was such a wonderful week. I tried to remember every little detail for the piper and there's no end of things to tell him. The habit of seeing things for two has grown on me, I guess," she laughed, dropping her sewing to her lap.

She possessed the happy faculty of drawing great pleasure from little things that most people let pass unnoticed. The flash of a dark wing against a crimson sky; a solitary tree, dripping with rain; the wind, stirring in the trees, with its noise of summer showers—these and numberless other things like them each quickened in her a responsive note of joy. Once he had found her bending over a creviced rock in which there was a newly sprung flower, a look of wonder in her

eyes, and afterwards, in recalling the look and thinking of her life in the mountains, he had sometimes wondered if this ability of hers to derive happiness from the beauty around her were not a kind of compensation for the absence of certain other things which he, with Uncle Gabriel, felt ought to have been hers.

"And that's all?" he asked, thoughtfully.

"Almost. One day I went shopping alone, and just as I was coming out of one of the stores, a car drove up to the curbing and stopped. The door opened for a lady, and then the chauffeur came up to where I was standing. His eyes popped out at me as if I were a mountain wraith or some other strange apparition, and as if he wondered whether I had been spirited away from the hills and dropped down in the midst of the city."

"Clem," laughed Gordon. "I can just see him."

She nodded. "I let him wonder for a little while."

"But you couldn't put him off long?"

"No, and when he was sure that it was really I, he said that he knew I would like to see your hospital and he drove me out there. It is very beautiful, isn't it? There were children at the windows and they waved to me. And Clem pointed out your house to me."

"I am glad," he said, "for your week, for everything that Clem or anybody else did for you. I wish that it might have been a year."

"No, I haven't made you understand if you wish that for me. You see, it's this way: always in the back of my head has been the idea that I was, well, it sounds very foolish but I can't think of any other way to say it, that I was going over the Glory Trail some day. Now it's almost as if I had gone and gotten back. I guess that probably half I went for, though I didn't know it at the time, was to hear the old music master tell me that there was nothing for me to look forward to, that

long ago I had put everything behind me. It's the uncertainty of things and the not knowing that beats you down. When you once give up and stop expecting, everything begins to look different."

Although it might be an unusual viewpoint for her to take, it was like her, Gordon knew, to see things in this way.

"Even now you don't quite grasp what I mean, I'm afraid," she said, her clear eyes meeting his steadfast gaze. "I had to say this all over to somebody to make it seem real; sometimes it seemed as if I couldn't wait to come home and tell you. It's as if a big weight had slipped from my shoulders and left me free. Oh, you do see, don't you, now, even if I haven't made it very clear? Look at me. I think I must even look different."

He understood now the expression of peace and fulfillment that had been on her face when she stood in the door waiting for him.

"Yes, Mary Malvern, I think that I do see," he replied, quietly.

"You will be going away soon?" she asked.

"In a day or two, now that you have come home," he said.

"I had a letter from Mr. Howard this morning stating that the hospital was in my hands again and asking me to report as soon as possible. I can't think what can have changed him. His letter was cordial and his invitation urgent. I had it in mind to build a new hospital; now this has come."

The quick smile she gave him was not one of surprise. "He just came to his senses," she remarked with the assurance of one who knew.

"And Prince probably told him about the piper. Poor boy, he was afraid that the Glory Trail had proved too alluring, but I told him that you would be sure to come back."

"And I told him that I went up and peeped over the rim,

looked down the other side, didn't like the looks and ran home."

"And what did he say to that?"

"He said," she replied, smiling, "'And now you have done what you have always wanted to, Miss Mary, you will never go away again.' And I never shall."

There was nothing of bitterness or regret or even of sadness in her voice, but only the quietness that comes from having accepted a situation as it is without further struggle or question, and, as she lifted her eyes again to his, by some subtle transfusion of thought from her to him, he comprehended her longing to enfold him in the peace and security that she now possessed.

That her happiness was not assumed he knew. One need only to look at her closely to be certain of that. But all the while she talked, he had been sure that she was emphasizing the change that had taken place in her mind in order to put him, who deserved nothing at her hands, at his ease. The maternal instinct, always strong in her, had triumphed over every obstacle; she was trying to save others from grief and discomfiture where, in a sense, she had not been able to save herself.

Since the night of revelation in her garden, he had not known a moment's peace. He had made her suffer, her whom he would have sheltered from further grief. He was to blame for having come to the mountains as he had, incognito; but since he had, he should have stood constant guard over the background of his past, the existence of which, although he was constantly aware of it, had at times, during the days of his friendly intimacy with Mary and the piper, seemed vague and shadowy. The sharp dividing line between that haunting past and this quieting present he had never meant for her to cross. The piper's accident had broken down the barriers; if one believed in fate, it would not be difficult to think that

fate had, to a large measure, been responsible for bringing them together. His mind went slipping back to the day she had saved him from death at the cliff; the stormy night, memorable to him now, when Uncle Gabriel had asked him to stop with her mail and he had sat in her room with her until the rain was over; the sultry evening when an obscure grass-grown path had taken him to her door; and all the other days and evenings of their comradeship that had made life seem very good, and wholesome, and altogether worth the living. Dr. Bailey had spoken half seriously of fate's hand in the matter of his being there, but Mary had believed otherwise, and he himself knew that at times one had to override even fate.

"You are very quiet, more quiet than usual." Her low voice recalled him.

"I have been thinking of all you have said—and many other things," he replied. "There's so much I shan't ever be able to forget, so much that I can never forgive myself for."

"But all that is past," she reminded him gently. "We can forget everything except that our friendship is big and is as eternal as—as the stars themselves."

There was a lumbering step on the porch, followed by a quick opening of the door.

"Why, Uncle Gabriel," they exclaimed together.

"There's a long-distance call for you, Mr. Gordon," announced the old man, thrusting his head through the doorway. "Come out and jump into the carriage and I'll see if I can speed up Old Hundred a little. Sorry to take him away," smiling at Mary.

He seemed amazed at the complacency with which Gordon received the message. Long-distance calls at the post office were a rarity and not usually treated so slightingly.

"It is probably Mr. Howard," said Gordon, turning to

Mary. "It would be quite like him to call. He is very impatient about waiting for answers to letters."

"I've headed off Eustasia Whitcomb and all the fellows, and shut every window tight as a drum so I guess you'll have no trouble hearing," remarked Uncle Gabriel as Gordon got into his overcoat, "but after you've gone, she'll be back to see what it's all about."

Gordon was exchanging a few hurried words with Mary Malvern, but, notwithstanding, the garrulous old man rambled on. "The party at the other end wanted to know how soon I could get you. I told 'em it all depended on Old Hundred, but that probably I could make it in an hour if they would hold the line. Somebody shouted that that was too long to hold the line and that they would call again in an hour. They tried to make me take a message but, I vum, I couldn't understand a word they said and no more could they, me though Hen Smith says I roared loud enough to make myself heard across the Pacific."

At last, to Uncle Gabriel's relief, they were off; Old Hundred, with constant prodding from his master, made a record trip, and in a little less time, Gordon concluded, than he could have covered the distance by walking, they were at the post office.

The telephone was ringing as Uncle Gabriel's nervous fingers fumbled with the key and unlocked the door.

Gordon, with the full expectancy of hearing Mr. Howard's voice, took down the receiver. But from across the distance Dr. Prince's voice reached him, muffled and indistinct. This much of the message, however, he made out—"Catch midnight flyer; Mrs. Gordon severely injured."

"Clarice!" burst from his lips. "Clarice severely injured!"

There was no time for anything but immediate action. The flyer was due in Fairlee before midnight and he must make it.

He hung up the receiver and turned to the bewildered old man, who stood watching every move he made.

"I have to catch the express at Fairlee," he said in anxious haste. "Do you suppose that Jed Stone could drive me up to my shack and over there in time?"

"Yes, he'll land you there and you'll have plenty of time then to sit and wait for the train, and recover from your ride, and thank your lucky stars that he got you there alive. Jed is the cussedest driver I ever knew. That contraption of his was running this morning, but it has a nervous breakdown every so often on account of overwork so you'd best call him."

In what seemed to Uncle Gabriel an incredibly short time, the rattling of Jed's car signified his approach, and Gordon, having left a note for him to deliver to Mary Malvern, was whisked out of sight.

"Clarice, Clarice," he repeated aloud, his forehead gathering into a troubled frown. "Sounds like a French dancing woman for all the world." Just as things seemed to be getting patched up between Mary and the doctor, and his hopes of convincing Martha Ann that he had not been so far off the track with his romancing were beginning to revive, it would be too bad if some foreign woman in pink satin and spangles (the alluring garb in which Uncle Gabriel's imagination invariably clothed her) had come in to interfere. Of course, the doctor was all right, but these Clarices had their wiles with which to trap the unwary. Maybe she wasn't injured at all but had only taken that way of getting the doctor home. And now what would Mary say when he gave her the note, and told her about the telephone message and Mr. Gordon's hurried departure? That reminded him that he must start for home if he were to find Mary up and deliver the doctor's letter. Eustasia Whitcomb was likely to appear at any minute now, making escape impossible.

So he blew out the lights, shut and locked the door, and having shuffled uncertainly down the sagging steps, made his way slowly across the field to where Old Hundred stood waiting for him in the darkness.

XVIII

On his long ride home, Gordon's thoughts were all centered upon Clarice. He could not realize that she was ill and suffering, for she had always seemed to him the embodiment of health and activity; she had been so full of life and energy that she had been out of patience with illness of any kind in others.

He shuddered at the thought of her slim, straight form disfigured, helpless, and there came to him a sudden vision of her as she had looked that last evening of his at home with her. Lovely as a spring flower she had seemed to him, cool and fragrant in her green petal-like draperies. And she had been disappointed when he had told her that she was the spring itself!

He had been unable to get a berth or even a chair and had sat throughout the night in an upright position in the stuffy coach, his mind too active to allow him the respite of a few minutes' sleep. It was a relief when the first gray streaks of dawn appeared. Smoke from dozens of chimney stacks rose into the clear air and went sailing off in little curling clouds of gold, white, and mottled gray. The smoke of the locomotive blew back shot with spars of sunlight. Morning had come and presently, as he looked from his window, partly open, he was confronted with the familiarity of sights and sounds which, because of his long absence from them, broke discordantly upon his eyes and ears. All along the way cities and towns were springing to life and the activity of another day.

And in the midst of so much activity, Clarice was lying still. His heart went out in pity to her. Prince was not one to exaggerate; he had said that she was severely injured.

The porters were brushing hats and coats, hunting up missing articles, reaching for baggage; the passengers, standing in a wavering line that swayed uncertainly toward the door, as Gordon made his way into one of the forward cars. A head above the crowd, he brushed his way past, his face so keenly intent that many strained forward to look at him. Before the train came to a full stop, he swung himself off the steps and hurried ahead of the throng, out to the station.

"Dr. Gordon, sir."

"Clem!"

"This way, sir," grasping the doctor's bag.

He followed Clem through the station and out to the car. A few minutes more of suspense and he was home.

In the hall were Miss Atwood and another white-capped individual, whom Gordon did not recognize, and Hilda, who stood fingering the frill of her crisp apron and sending him shy smiles of welcome.

It was Miss Atwood who spoke and with that naturalness of tone and manner which, through habitual contact with emergency, nurses and doctors are, to the wonder of everybody else, able to maintain.

"It is good to see you again, Dr. Gordon."

He greeted them all kindly, if somewhat absently. There was with him a vague sense of unreality about his being there among them, for which he felt the precipitancy of his coming might be partly responsible. It was as if he were returning to some old existence out of which he had years ago emerged. And, oddly enough, the sight of familiar faces and objects only seemed to intensify this impression. Like a stranger in his own house, he stood among them, looking hesitantly about him as if waiting to be directed what to do. It was with

a feeling of relaxation from a severe tension that he heard a door open and saw Dr. Prince coming out of the library.

"Thank God, you are here at last," he said, extending his hand. "I've not been able to make her understand why you were not here. She has been asking for you every minute for the last five hours. You look pretty much all in yourself. Very tiresome trip."

Gordon started mechanically up the stairs, but stopped half way up and looked down to where Dr. Prince and Miss Atwood stood talking together in subdued voices.

"Before I see her, Prince, I want to know something— Is everything as bad as your first thought?"

"Yes, quite as bad. I called a consultation this morning; it seemed not advisable to wait for you. I'll be here when you come down."

Through all the night Gordon had been dreading to see her. Quietly he opened the door and stepped into her room. He was prepared to find her hurt, mangled, but when he let his glance rest upon her, he knew that his worst fears for her were not realized. There was not a scar that he could see and, for all her suffering, she looked young and pretty, like a child, with her fair, short hair drawn smoothly back from her forehead; and, except for her thin, tired face, whose pallor melted into the whiteness of the pillow, she seemed quite like herself, almost as she had the last time that he had seen her, asleep, with her head upon her arm.

As he stood looking down at her, overwhelmed with pity and concern, her pale lashes fluttered weakly and lifted. She stirred under the bedclothes and tried to reach up her arms to him. Failing in this, she motioned with a slight nod for him to sit down beside her.

"They tried to fool me," she wailed, her voice thinner and higher through her pain. "That crusty Prince told me that you were here, but I knew that you weren't."

She talked coherently and deliriously by turns while he sat with both her slim hands in his, scarcely able to realize that it was Clarice who lay there colorless and still.

"There are some folks we want about us when we're well," she murmured so inarticulately that he bent his ear close to her lips to catch the words, "and some we need when we are sick. You are the kind, Dan, we want when we are like this," her characteristic little shrug moving the coverlet on her shoulder. "You won't leave me now; you'll promise?"

"Yes, I'll promise; you know that I won't leave you," with a slight pressure of her hands.

"But promise, promise again," she pleaded, her voice rising high as she clung, like a frightened child, to his strong, assuring hands.

"Never, so long as you want me here."

"But, don't you see, I shall always want you now."

It seemed to him that the last word was italicized and he thought that he understood.

She made him repeat his promise a third time before she would be satisfied, and listened to it eagerly, tugging resolutely at his fingers.

"Clarice," he said gently, loosening her feverish hands from his, "they ought to give you more air. I'm going to open a window. It's stifling here."

"Why, Dan, it isn't hot," she protested feebly. "Don't leave me," as he made a movement to rise. "Stay with me, close to me here."

But he put aside her detaining arms, crossed the room, and, having thrown open her wide casement window, leaned out for a breath of air. The fragrance of the flowers, which almost obscured her dressing table by their profusion, was oppressive and the atmosphere of her room, heavy, and he had felt suffocated for a breath of air.

The crisp October wind blew refreshingly in his face. In

the garden below, Clem was at work raking leaves. Little smoking heaps of them lay at irregular intervals in the big walled-in enclosure. The year was pretty well burned out. By night there would be nothing left in the garden to remind one that there had ever been a leaf or a flower, a springtime or a summer; nothing but piles of ashes.

From the pillows her muffled voice reached him in a complaining wail. "Dan, come back. You promised that you wouldn't go. Come."

Her anxious entreaties, which at first he had attributed to her semi-delirious condition, now began to connect themselves in his mind with the last letter she had written. The idea of his leaving her had become a kind of obsession with her.

Going back to her, he touched her burning forehead with the tips of his cool fingers.

"I have given my promise," he said to comfort her. "There isn't a minute you want me that I shan't be here."

She had never known him willingly to break a promise and, with his renewal of this one, she lay back against his arm and fell into a quiet sleep.

A few minutes later, when he went downstairs, he found Dr. Prince in the library waiting for him.

"Now about Mrs. Gordon," he began abruptly with a slight lift of his bushy eyebrows— "Sit down, Gordon. She's asleep now?"

Gordon nodded.

"I thought so. She's been fighting to keep awake until you should come. She has been distracted with the idea that you weren't ever coming back—on account of some letter that she had written. She wanted you to know that she had been only in fun."

"Yes, I think I understand. Go on."

"There's no need of my beating about the bush. There's not a chance that she'll ever walk again. Last night, when I

telephoned, we didn't think there was a chance in ten for her to live, but we believe now that she will pull through. Everything is in her favor as far as recovery is concerned, but she will always be confined to a wheel chair. That's the bitter part."

"Does she know this?" asked her husband, sharply, in a strained voice.

"No, if she did, I think from what I know of Mrs. Gordon that she would consider it not worth the effort to try to live. As it is, she has been putting up a plucky fight and it's, to a great measure, her will power that has kept her going."

"You know what it will mean to her, don't you, Prince? She would die if she knew the truth. We must keep it from her as long as we can."

"What makes it such an infernal shame, Dan, is that this need not have happened."

"An automobile smash-up, I suppose."

"Another one of that damned Merriwether's escapades."

"Merriwether!" broke from Gordon, his throat tightening.

"For some reason the trip his party planned was deferred. It's too bad he hadn't left the city. He was racing with another car in which Mrs. Gordon was riding. It was a frightful accident. Two of the party were hurled from the car and killed instantly. Archer, with his usual luck, got out of it with only a few bruises and cuts. I hope for the sake of humanity that he will be made an example of and showed the extent of the law."

"Was it Clarice who was driving the other car?"

"No. The other car slowed down to let him pass, but he had been drinking and lost control of the brakes. He plunged into it headlong."

The doctor's face was red with indignation; Gordon's, bloodless and rigid; his hands clutched the arms of his chair and he did not speak.

"She's in your keeping now, Dan, but I am here to help you." He shot out his big hand as he rose to go. "By the way, I want to know about that boy up in the hills. Peter Piper, is it? You seem to have forgotten that I have been up there and met your friends, but my bones and muscles don't let me forget for very long at a time. I'm not wholly limbered up yet."

"If it had been for anybody else but them, I should never have had the nerve to ask you to come. The piper will soon be running about again."

"And that beautiful woman, Mary Malvern?"

"I was with her when the old postmaster brought me your message. She has been down here since you were up there."

"Yes, I saw her."

"It's strange she didn't mention that."

"Or Mr. Howard?"

"Howard!—no."

"By Jove, didn't she tell you that? I got it all from Howard himself. It seems that Clem met her by chance coming out of a store and, thinking she'd like to look over the hospital, drove her out there. Clem introduced her to Miss Atwood, who, by the way, was in full charge, Digby having been discharged some two weeks before. She was showing Miss Malvern through the hospital when, as luck would have it, Howard happened along. Well, you know how proud of the place he is and how set up he feels when a visitor is around, and I guess before Miss Atwood knew what had happened, he had taken Miss Malvern under his wing, and there wasn't a nook or a corner of the hospital that he didn't show her. After they had been through the wards, he took her to the reception room and there, he said, for quite a while they just talked about the hills. It seems he was raised up in the White Mountains and he got to telling her little incidents of his boyhood that he hadn't thought of in years. She had such a

way of listening, he said, he couldn't keep himself from talking and ran on and on until he was quite ashamed of himself. She found the old man's heart, I guess, that we believed incapable of action.

"Then she told him all about the piper, and about his being saved for her by a wonderful surgeon, the man who ought to be at the head of the hospital he had just shown her through. Howard was all interest until she gave him your name. And then he says he can't remember, he doesn't dare to try to call to mind the things he said to her.

"Howard told me that it was her utter frankness that melted him and made him see what, for a long time, he had been blinding his eyes to—the injustice that he had done you. Anyway, to shorten the story, before she left the city, he insisted that she come up to his house and he opened up the blinds of that somber library of his and the piano, and—well, to use his own expression, he thought that he was a boy again with all the dreams of his boyhood before him when she played to him. The next day, I believe, he wrote to you."

Gordon's face was a study when the doctor finished his story; it was an amazing sequel to that which Mary Malvern had told him in her quiet room only a night ago.

"I took it for granted that she had given you an account of it all. Perhaps I ought to have known that she wouldn't be likely to. I suppose that you were coming home in a day or so anyway, weren't you?"

"Yes, I wasn't intending to stay up there any longer."

"She came down to see an old music teacher, I understand."

"Yes, someone who used to give her lessons when she was a girl."

"I see."

The subject dropped there and Dr. Prince, a few minutes later, left the house. He was a man of astute perception and had to a remarkable degree the power of grasping an intri-

cate situation, but the problem that was now revolving itself behind the shaggy eyebrows of his massive forehead was one that he acknowledged to be beyond his comprehension.

His mind was full of unanswerable questions as he passed slowly down the steps. His glance went up to the windows of the room where Clarice Gordon lay, hovering between life and death, but his thoughts were all with Gordon and that other woman of the hills. He wondered if her eyes were still suffused with the sunlight that he had seen in them or if, by any chance, they had become lusterless because she, too, had been hurt. It was none of his business, he reminded himself forcefully, but Gordon was his best friend, and Mary Malvern—well, one could not see her and not wish her to be happy.

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Gordon sat with his wife all the afternoon and into the evening until he was sure that his going away would not arouse her. Then, eager to be alone, he sought his own room, and closed the door. Everything there was just as he had left it, his books, his pictures, all his old cherished possessions. He breathed deeply—the first free breath he had drawn since he left the mountains—and pulled his shabby easy-chair up to the window. Beyond the fields, the moonlight made of the river a light, rippling path. The night was intensely still, as still as Clarice, who lay in the room beneath him, watched over by two nurses.

Sleep was impossible and he picked up a book, but the words blurred into a jumble of black and white as confusing as the thoughts that crossed and recrossed each other in his mind. Raising his eyes from the page he was trying to read, his glance fell upon the picture he had brought home to Clarice shortly after their marriage and which had hung in his room ever since. With a sudden leap of his blood he crossed the room and stood before it—the mother with two

little children at her feet and a baby in her arms. Without arousing in him any feeling of self-pity, the picture seemed to typify to him some of the dearest, noblest things in life, things that he must never hope to have. And as he remained quietly before it, his eyes upon the gentle mother's face, it recalled to him another picture—a tall, slender woman, her hair a halo of light, coming through a dim vista of trees, with a little sleeping child in her arms.

In his loneliness and doubt, his heart reached out for her. What was it she had said the old music master had told her? Oh, yes, he remembered now, that it was not enough for one to have courage; one must be happy, too. And what was it he had said about the "high heart"?—that was it, the "high heart." Mary Malvern had liked the expression for there was truth in it as well as poetry. If only he could tell Clarice about it, but he had never had the knack of making her understand. If she could only glimpse the meaning that Mary Malvern had seen and understood, it might be to her a means of escape from the prison walls that were, he knew, mercilessly closing in around her, shutting out forever all that she held dear in life. But he was afraid that it would sound sentimental to her. It hadn't as Mary Malvern had told it; it had seemed sensible and strong and worthwhile. Perhaps some day when she was stronger, he could tell her; at any rate, for her sake, he must try, for he knew that without the key of courage to her prison door, life to her would be impossible.

She was still sleeping when he went back to her, her head resting on her arm, her thin lips half parted to make breathing less difficult.

The night nurse, seated at the table, rose from her chair as he entered the room. "She is sleeping beautifully," she said, looking up into his strong, tired face. "She seems to feel that now you have come everything is going to be all right."

"We'll hope that it will be," was his grave answer. "I shall be across the hall. If she asks for me, just speak and I'll come."

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The mountain village had quite recovered from the little stir that the doctor's abrupt departure had occasioned and had come, after much comment and conjecture, to accept Mary Malvern's brief answer to its inquiries—that he had been called home on account of illness in his family.

But Uncle Gabriel, who had his own thoughts on the matter, pondered not infrequently over the fancy name that he had heard from Gordon's own lips, although not once, not even to Martha Ann, had he repeated it. Of course, the woman might be a maiden sister or a cousin. Ordinary human beings sometimes had foolish sounding names. Witness the Skinner progeny.

Gossip was less rife than it might otherwise have been since Mrs. Eustasia Whitcomb had transferred her attention to a matter of more immediate interest. Ezra Perkins' youngest daughter, having become tired of the drudgery of the farm, had followed in the footsteps of her older sister and eloped with a ne'er-do-well who lived on the other side of the mountain. The girl, who was very clever with her needle, had, during her spare hours, of which she had known all too few, sewed for Mrs. Whitcomb, and was at her home, as it happened, the very day preceding her elopement. Eustasia had scented something in the air and now only wished that she had not refrained from giving Annie Perkins a piece of her mind. She kept recalling, now that the calamitous thing had happened, little remarks of the girl's, thrown out from time to time, that had seemed of no consequence whatever, but that now were full of significance. So it was that, with a mind replete with matter and a tongue glib to proclaim the same, she busied herself with going from house to house, pleased with every telling of it to hear her story grow.

As for Mary Malvern, she went about her work with little change, keeping careful watch over Peter Piper to see that in his enthusiasm to run about again he should not overtax his strength. Of her neighbors she saw but little since she made no calls and was seldom in the house to receive calls from any of them who, prompted by kindness or curiosity, might come to see her. Winter was not far off and she must not lose a minute of the autumn. Every day found her in the fields or woods, inhaling very life breaths from their exhilarating splendor.

The first Sunday after Gordon's departure, she was conscious from her place at the organ that every eye was upon her and that, during the service, more glances were directed toward her than toward Dr. Carruth, a tall, impressive figure behind his plain, high pulpit. But her manner among them was the same and, after a little, because she seemed so natural, so like herself, they forgot to wonder.

There was never a day that the piper did not ask her about the return of his friend. It startled an old memory in her one day when he broke off in the middle of a tune and began to talk about the Chimæra. "I call him Mr. Bellerophon to myself," he said. "Perhaps he has gone to look for the winged horse."

"I think that he found him a long time ago, dear," she replied, "and that he killed the Chimæra."

She told him one day, when he asked her, about his accident, of which he could remember nothing, and the wonderful operation following, by which Mr. Gordon had saved his life.

"It almost seems as if I belong to him a little," the piper had said earnestly. "Anyway I shall watch for him until he comes back. It was by a lake that Bellerophon returned to the boy."

They were sitting by the lake, to which he had been able to

walk with her arm to support him, and he had been playing Pippa's happy spring song with as much zest as if it were an April morning. It was a typical Indian summer's day, warm with fading color and mellow sunshine. To the woman listening to him, the snatch of song seemed almost like an echo out of the past.

"The year isn't at the spring any more, Piper," she reminded him gently with a quiet laugh at his inconsistencies; "day isn't at the morn; the lark has flown away from the meadow and the snail has left the thorn." Then, as his face sobered, "But it's always spring with you, isn't it? And so it's all right for you to play your song at any season of the year."

He flashed her a bright smile as he laid his flute on the ground beside him and leaned back against her arm. Peter Piper had grown very sturdy and self-reliant of late, but during his illness and thereafter he had seemed in many ways like a little boy again. The pressure of his dark head against her was a reminder of the old days when he had liked to sit just as he was sitting now and listen to her stories of kind fairies and dapper elves, who peopled the big, dim woods.

"Just a little while ago the mountains were on fire with color," she told him, "and the lake, like a big mirror that reflected every crimson, yellow, brown, and green; and the sky seemed to come down and touch the burning hills. Sometimes at sunset it used to look as if it had come too near and caught the fire from them. The golds and reds were just running riot together. The sunset isn't so gorgeous to-night, but it is very brilliant all the same. Just this side of a flaming cloud there's a big, wide sea of pink with gold-tipped clouds, like little boats sailing around in it, and there's a splash of blue that hasn't caught fire yet." With a little, rapturous catch of her breath, her clasp tightened on his arm. "And listen, Peter, the woods are very still; there isn't a sound; there never was such a stillness as this."

"When the fires of the hills and the skies are all burned out, Miss Mary, then they'll be gray, all smoldering gray ashes with gray skies over them. Then the white snow will fall on the ashes and put out all the little left-over sparks of fire, and there'll be a hushed white stillness. But to-day Simrise Mountain is just like a volcano, I think."

It was a long time since he had said anything like that. With his new studies, his mind had been less given to his old imaginings and he had outgrown many of his childhood fancies. She had been glad of this, but, as anxious as she had been for him to put his dreams away, she had not wanted him to forget them all.

Sometimes in thinking of the piper and in listening to his animated talk of figures, and scientific facts, and historical events, she had almost in the same thought rejoiced at the boy's mental growth and regretted the change that had taken place in him.

"It's always that way, I suppose, when one's children grow up," Gordon had said. "But the piper will keep the best of his dreams to the end because some of them are the things with which you have made him see."

"I feel very warm," the boy whispered; "the colors are so bright."

"They will be fading very soon now."

"Are you sure that he will come back some day?" It was his usual question without which his day was never complete, and she gave him the usual answer.

"Yes, I am very sure. I don't know why, but I am."

Her tone was so casual that he asked doubtfully, "You miss him, don't you?"

"Yes, I miss him; we shall always miss him—but it will always be different now that he has been here, won't it? Never quite the same, I mean, as it was before he came. By

now I suppose that he is doing for lots of boys and girls just what he did for you."

"But why did he leave his hospital?" asked Peter Piper.

"He was tired out," she replied. "I shall never forget how very tired he looked that day we found him on the cliff. Doesn't it seem a long time ago?"

"Perhaps when he gets tired again," observed the boy, clinging to his cherished dream, "he will come back and live in his shack again."

She was sorry to disappoint him, but she felt that she could not let him entertain any false hope. "No, he doesn't often take a vacation, never as long a one as this. He only happened to come here. Next year he will go to some other place."

"Then we have lost him!" He had arisen during her telling of the story, but he now flung himself down onto the ground beside her and buried his face in his arms so that it was only by bending over him she was able to catch his muffled words.

"I know now—you have known all the time—that he is never coming back."

Never had she seen the boy give way to grief, like this. Over things that hurt him he had, even as a little fellow, maintained a stolid silence. She used often to wish that he were not so self-contained in order that she might better know how to comfort him.

Mr. Gordon had told her that he must not get over-tired or excited. She must not let him sob his heart out in this fashion. But it was hard to speak to him, now, when her own heart was crying, too.

"If you have a real friend and love him with all your heart, you can't ever lose him. If you really lose a thing, it's just as if you had never had it, and that isn't the way you feel about Mr. Gordon, is it?"

"Oh, no," he breathed. "There are all the hikes we've taken

and the things he has taught me, but, Miss Mary," he cried, pushing her hand from him, "they are not—him."

There was nothing she could say in answer to that. The words were like the echo of a cry from her own heart.

"There's no use of waiting here for him any longer," he said hopelessly, getting to his feet.

"Is that what you wanted to come for this afternoon, dear?" she questioned kindly, recalling how she had found him on the piazza steps, a mournful, solitary little creature, sitting with his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands, so unlike himself that she had been alarmed.

He nodded. "Yes, but I am not going to look any more. Listen, isn't that Uncle Gabriel? He promised to let me ride down with him to-night and get the mail. Oh, please don't say I can't," he pleaded, seeming to feel the reluctance in her mind. "He drives ever so carefully and he promised to bring me back in half an hour."

"Uncle Gabriel's half hours are pretty long, you know, sometimes," she answered with a quiet smile. "I don't want you to get over-tired. This has been a long day for you."

But in the end, when Uncle Gabriel's entreaties were added to the boy's, and both promised to come back very soon, she yielded and walked with them across the field in order to help lift Peter Piper up into the high, old buggy.

"You will wait for me right here, Miss Mary," he said, smiling down at her.

"Yes, right here by the wall and you'll come back soon."

But he was gone so long that she grew anxious about him. The colors in the west had melted into gray; the flaming hills darkened, and one luminous star pricked its way into the notch of sky between two acute mountain peaks. She was about to start down the road to meet him when she heard his flute, still a long way off.

"Oh, Miss Mary," he panted when Uncle Gabriel had lifted

him down from the wagon, and driven off, "Mr. Skinner has been looking for me all the afternoon and so Uncle Gabby drove me up there to-night, but they weren't there. Nobody's there; the house is all empty. There's not a thing left but the piano. I looked in every room."

His face was pale with dismay and he was trembling from fatigue and excitement.

"I ought not to have let you go," she said, pulling him down to the wall beside her. "We'll stay here until you are rested. If they have gone off on another excursion, so much the better. They won't be expecting you to come home. Probably they wanted to take you with them. I'm so thankful that they did not find you. I am sure that they must be gypsies. They try to settle down and be like other people, but they simply can't do it. Their gypsy blood gets the best of them."

"I guess that's it," he said disconsolately.

"Was there any mail, dear? I didn't think to ask."

"A letter for you."

"It's too dark to read it here," she said, taking the note from his hand. "We'll go home and see whom it's from. It's time that you were thinking about bed, Peter Piper."

But when they reached her door, he could not be persuaded to go in. "I'll sit out here on the steps a little while, I guess, until you read your letter," he said with a vague apprehension that in some strange way it had something to do with him.

When she had lighted her lamp, she read, re-read, and read again the brief note, while Peter Piper, all unconscious of its momentous contents, sat on the steps, fingering his flute. For a few moments she stood in the middle of the room, the paper trembling in her hand. Then swiftly she went to the door and flung it wide open.

"Come in, Piper," she cried joyously. "Come home!"

"What is it, Miss Mary?" he asked, getting up from the step. "Your voice—. What has happened?"

She drew him within the door and closed it behind them.

"They are never coming back, Peter Piper," she began, holding his hand very tightly. "They have taken everything, just left one remembrance behind, one gift—for me."

Watching his face closely, she saw that he did not comprehend the significance of her words.

"A gift?" he repeated incredulously. "But they didn't have anything to give away."

"They had one very dear possession. Oh, Piper," she cried in her happiness, "can't you guess?"

Something in her voice or her manner conveyed the truth home to him. Instinctively, he loosened his hand from hers.

"Aren't you glad, dear?" she faltered.

"If they had only told me," he said, moving away from her.

"Perhaps they just decided to go on the spur of the moment. Mr. Skinner did try to find you. They all wanted to tell you good-by."

"It isn't that," he murmured, his hand on the door.

"But where are you going, dear?"

"Up there," he answered, his lips compressed into a thin, hard little line.

"But don't you understand, dear? They've gone forever and they've given you to me to keep. Don't you see that now you belong to me?"

"One time," he choked, "Seraphina gave Aunt Martha one of Gypsy's puppies, but she didn't want it. She only kept it because Seraphina gave it to her. I'm not—not something for them to leave behind. I'm going up there now," he declared, grim defiance in his voice.

Suddenly it came to her as he stood before her, his hands clenched, his dark head thrown back, his body tense and

quivering, that he was no longer a little boy who could be disposed of by the Skinners or by anybody else, but that he had entered into his manhood and that, if she were to win him to herself, it must be through some appeal other than she had already made.

"But, Peter Piper," she said, swallowing something that threatened to break the steadiness of her voice, "I need you. Oh, Piper, can't you see, dear, that I'm lonely and—I want you so."

He hesitated, but only for an instant. Something told him that her arms were open, and into their tender embrace he walked, and laid his head upon her shoulder.

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When she had put out his light and gone over to his bed, he reached up and drew her face down to his. "I don't have to pretend any longer," he whispered in her ear.

"Pretend what, dear?"

"That I have a mother—too. But, mother, aren't you happy? Your tears are falling on my face."

Long after he had fallen asleep, she sat in the darkness of her room by the window that looked out to the Glory Trail. To-night she could not see it for the shadows, but it was there for the piper to follow. And she would see to it that he climbed high. She would allow nothing to pull him back, but for a long time he would be her very own to keep, to watch over, to help make ready to go; and when the time came for him to leave her and the mountains, with all her heart she would send him forth upon his way. She must keep the trail clear for him to follow, clear as the very stars that shed their radiance upon it. For his sake, she must never falter or be afraid. She must be worthy of her motherhood, of the great gift that heaven had sent her.

She arose from her chair thoughtfully and lighted a candle, and by its uncertain flicker read again the letter that had

consigned to her, a lonely woman without a single living relation, a son to be her own.

"Dear Miss Mary," ran the note in what she recognized to be Mr. Skinner's big, flourishing hand, "This is to say that we are leaving the mountains forever and we want you to have Peter Piper. He is more your kind than ours and we leave him to you as a parting gift. Seraphina wants me to thank you for giving her piano lessons and Mrs. Skinner thanks you for being so nice to her when the twins had the scarlet fever and everybody else was afraid to come near the house. Maybe Peter Piper will kind of make up for everything. Your friends the Skinners."

There was no thought in her mind any more than there had apparently been in Mr. Skinner's that the donation of Peter Piper to her entailed anything with it. And she accepted it as an offering of love without suspicion of any ulterior motive on the part of the giver.

She folded the paper carefully and laid it between the leaves of a book on her table, thinking of the years and years ahead that he would be hers to keep.

XIX

It had been a day of triumph for Gordon at the hospital. "Have to slow up a bit over these slippery crossings," remarked Clem, who was driving him home. "Regular dripping autumn day, isn't it, Doctor? We have sure had some wet fall. I wonder how it looks up in the mountains now. It must be a mighty barren spot in winter."

"Yes, I suspect that it is. Somehow I keep forgetting that you have been there, too."

"I'm not soon forgetting that long ride, but it was worth it all."

"I'm going to run off again up there, Clem, for a little while."

"Going off again when you've only just come home a few weeks ago and just got back to the hospital?"

"I was called home, you remember, in pretty much of a hurry. I just banged the door of my small house to and left. There are things I must attend to at the Clarks' and, besides, I have an important errand up there."

"With Miss Malvern and the piper?"

"Something that I hope will make her, will make them both very happy," answered Gordon. "It is the one thing that I am going up there for."

"I hope it will; they ought to be very happy, both of them."

Upon arriving home, Gordon broached the subject of his going away to Clarice, whom he found reclining among white, downy pillows in her wheel chair, which the nurse had rolled into the sunniest corner of the library.

Her illness had made little change in her appearance except to accentuate the slenderness of her figure and the delicate transparency of her skin. As her husband entered the room, she held out a languid hand to him.

His heart was bursting with the news of his success. He had that morning saved a boy whose case three skillful physicians had pronounced hopeless. But since his return home, he had made it a point never to speak to her of the hospital. After inquiring as to how everything had been with her all day, and listening sympathetically to a dozen or more little grievances she had been hoarding up in her mind to tell him, he came to the subject that was on his mind.

She met his announcement with frank surprise and displeasure. "But I don't see at all why you need to go off up there. I thought that now you had gotten back to your hospital, nothing could ever drag you away again."

"Nothing but something very important could," he told her. "It will be for only two or three days, you know. And now that you can sit up a part of each day, you won't miss me so much."

"You promised that you would never leave me," she complained, her underlip drooping in a characteristic little pout.

"As long as you needed me. You are stronger now, much stronger than any of us dared to hope that you would be in so short a time."

"Well, then, if you must, I suppose that you will have to go, but be sure to come home soon or I shall send somebody up there to look you up. What a queer fancy you seem to have taken to those mountains! But you always were a little queer about some things, Dan, and I suppose that you will never change."

He didn't mind the pointed irony of her words as he would have minded once; he was learning every day in his new relation with Clarice that there is nothing to which, through

habitual contact with it, one cannot accustom himself, and, aside from his being sorry for her and wishing to make her as happy as possible, he was becoming quite impervious to all her little reproaches and complaints.

"Just as soon as I am a bit stronger, Celeste is coming over to design a gown for me. And, oh, Dan, Marie Van der Puyl has given me a part in the play she is going to put on in March. I told her that I thought I should be able to do it by then," she added, noting the look of surprise that had crossed his face. "March is a long way off and I'm sitting up two hours a day now."

"You—a part?" he asked incredulously but kindly, wondering if it could be possible that, after all, she did not understand that she was never going to walk again.

"Yes, I'm going to be the fairy queen, Titania," she explained. "Everybody has to kneel before me and pay homage. You see that, without my really doing anything, I'm to be the whole center of attraction. It's an awfully clever play for Marie to have thought up and she says that she had me especially in mind when she was writing it. It's nice that she is rather bright and witty because she hasn't either looks or style. To-day she was positively dowdy, and with all her money it's disgraceful for her to appear so ridiculous."

"Marie has a great deal of discernment," he said, grateful to her for having given Clarice something to plan for and look forward to. "And if you continue to improve, I can't see why you won't be able to be a first-rate queen by March, especially a fairy queen, since they are supposed to be a little pale anyway, aren't they?"

"I don't know that modern fairies would be pale any more than modern people are," she returned with something of her old flippancy. "But a little rouge and lipstick will fix that all right anyway, and it won't take a great amount of pep to sit on a throne and beam upon one's subjects."

They had put off, as long as Gordon had considered it wise, making known to her the seriousness of her injuries. Dr. Prince would have waited longer, but Gordon in his characteristically direct way differed from him. "She is beginning to ask questions about herself," he said. "I'm not skillful at evading and I won't tell her lies that later I shall have to retract." The decision made, Prince, to spare his friend, would have told her himself had not Gordon insisted that, as her husband, it was his place to do so.

She had received the news that he broke to her, as gently as he knew how, far differently from the way in which he had expected that she would, for, after her first passionate outburst against a fate that had brought her to such extremities, threats to end her life, and days and nights in which she had helplessly clung to him, begging him to save her from herself, she had settled comfortably back into a state of resigned invalidism and had made of her chair a kind of throne at which everybody was expected to pay loving reverence.

The change in her had taken place very abruptly. When he had left her one morning a little less than a week ago, she had been in an hysterical condition, complaining bitterly for having been allowed to live to suffer; but upon his return in the late afternoon, he had found her in her chair, exquisite in her most becoming dressing-gown, and smiling complacently from her pillows.

He marveled at the change in her, but said nothing except to tell her how much better she was looking. He had so many times wanted to sit down beside her and, in the dim quiet of her room, tell her about Mary Malvern and her old music master and what he had said. But he had never been able to get the words together so that they sounded right. Clarice must not think that he was preaching to her. Mary had not meant it that way. He tried to bring himself to talk to her about Mary Malvern and the piper, thinking that perhaps by

so doing he could divert her mind and relieve his own. But, although their names had many times risen to his lips, he had never spoken them aloud to her.

He was wondering at the change in her when she addressed him. "Dan," she said, a wan little smile lifting the corners of her pale lips, "that awfully pompous Mrs. Leighton called to-day. You know, Mrs. Mortimer Leighton. You met her at that last reception of ours. She said when she went that everybody felt so terribly sorry for me and that she had rather dreaded coming to see me, but that the minute she laid her eyes on me in my chair she felt differently. For listen, Dan, she told me that I was the most perfect looking invalid she had ever seen, just like the kind you read about in books, cool, and lacy, and lovely as a flower. Real sick folk, she said, and I agree, are not usually that way, but look all messy, and feverish, and disagreeable. She told me that I was just made to be waited on and petted and that now I could live up to my part. Do see the luscious flowers she brought me," indicating by a nod over her shoulder, a bowl of dark red roses on the library table behind her. "I didn't suppose that she would even call, she notices so few people," she said with a little note of triumph in her voice.

From Mrs. Mortimer Leighton's chance suggestion, Clarice, he saw, had taken her cue. With the instinct for drama strong in her nature, she studied to play her part effectively, to appear lovelier for her misfortune, and even practiced the smile of patient resignation with which she would receive the few guests that were now, on days when she felt at her best, permitted to call, and she accomplished her purpose so well that she was a wonder to all who saw her.

She was, indeed, happier than she had supposed that she ever could be again, for she had come, little by little, to realize that life still held something in store for her. With her own luxurious car, a chauffeur, and a nurse in constant attendance, she need not altogether give up the things that had in previous

days seemed so necessary to her existence. When her husband had reminded her of this, she had rebelled, but gradually she had come to admit into her mind a great many concessions that had, at first, seemed obnoxious to her.

"I can't see myself being carried in your arms or anybody else's into the Opera House, or being rolled down the aisle in a wheel chair," she had flung out at him passionately.

He had made no answer, knowing that when life should begin to assert itself in her, she would look at things in a different light, moreover, his overwhelming pity for her had kept him silent.

But her husband did not try to deceive himself into thinking that her happiness could be of long duration. When her acquaintances—not many of them he found were real friends to her—should have gotten over the shock that her calamity had forced upon them, and come to take her invalidism for granted, her little play would become tiresome to her, and then there would be need for her to fall back on something more substantial for comfort. Just at present she was in her favorite position, before the public, an object of their sympathy and concern. She was compelling people to say that she was plucky. That they might ever come to lag in their attentions or their solicitation for her seemed never to have occurred to her. Nor did her husband, anxious for her comfort, dwell upon this thought. He only stood in the background, ready when she should need him.

"I am here all the time now, Dan," she was saying, "always here when you come home from the hospital. You used to wish that you would find me here, sitting in the window, watching for you. No, you didn't say so but I knew. Well," after a long pause, "you can't complain now, can you?"

"No, I can't complain—of anything," he answered in a tone of voice that she did not understand.

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"And so it seems that the Skinners have cleared out bag and baggage and left Peter Piper to Mary Malvern. I vum, the doings of Providence are not to be accounted for," observed Uncle Gabriel from his perch behind the counter where, for half an hour, regardless of any chance customer, he had been holding forth to a group of eager listeners.

"Doings of Providence!" spoke up Mrs. Eustasia Whitcomb, testily. "I should call it the doings of the Skinners."

"Yes," he agreed, "I call it a piece of impertinence on the part of the Skinners, but Mary's pleased. I guess it would have broken her heart if they had lugged him off with them, but, all the same, a person ought to be consulted before having a family thrust upon them. Mary has legally adopted Peter Piper, you know," he continued casually, pleasantly aware, nevertheless, that he was handing out to them a piece of first-hand information.

"No," came in surprised unison from his hearers.

"Yes, papers passed day before yesterday. She has given him her own name. He is Peter Piper Malvern now. The boy calls her 'Mother' as naturally as if he was her own child. It's going to come kind of hard on Mary to raise him, I guess, but she doesn't seem concerned. She hasn't been so happy in a long time."

"Not since before Dr. Gordon went, you might say," observed Mrs. Whitcomb. "As for her bringing up the boy, I guess that with the salary she will draw teaching the village school, and her music pupils, she will have a very tidy little income."

"It will be a 'little' income all right if she is depending on the village school for it," remarked Uncle Gabriel, taking his pipe from his pocket. "She won't have to be worrying about paying an income tax right away, Eustasia, and as for her music pupils, I guess if the truth was known, she is giving a good part of them their lessons. Providence has a way of

evening things up. Those that have the ability don't seem to have the means, and those that have the money aren't overtaxed with brains.

"Mr. Morton just happened to remark to me one day when Mary was in the store that his little girl was home drumming out tunes on the window-sills for want of something better to play on. That was enough. The next week Mary began to give her lessons, and she lets the little girl come up to her house every morning to practice on her piano."

"It's a mere matter of sentiment on her part, adopting him and all that," opined Mrs. Whitcomb. "And the idea of his calling her 'Mother,' her, an unmarried woman. No knowing what folks may be saying some day. There'll be a good many embarrassing situations arising from it, if I am not mistaken. An unmarried woman has her good name to consider," she asserted with implications in her voice that Uncle Gabriel, at least, did not fail to comprehend. "Of course, if a woman has a husband to protect her—." She spoke with the dignity and assurance of one who, after fifty odd years of what she was pleased to call "single blessedness," had taken unto herself a mate.

"Anybody would think to hear you talk, Eustasia, that she had done some wicked thing," shouted Uncle Gabriel, letting himself down stiffly from the counter. "Not a soul would ever say a single word against Mary Malvern, and if she wants to adopt that boy and let him call her 'Mother,' it's nobody's affair but her own. I'm glad, for my part, that she has him for her son. It's a pity she couldn't have had half a dozen babies."

"Gabriel Bent!"

"I mean it, and you had no right to speak the way you did."

"You don't need to excite yourself," she said. "I was only thinking that motherhood is divine and that 'Mother' is a sacred name."

"Then it just suits Mary Malvern," came in a deep voice from the door.

The conversation had taken such an interesting turn that nobody had noticed that Dr. Carruth had entered the store and stood waiting for his mail.

"And in receiving that lone blind boy into her home and heart, to use the Master's own words, she has received the Lord Christ, Himself."

Having taken his mail from the postmaster's trembling hand, he walked out of the room as quietly as he had entered it and spoke to someone who, to all appearances, was waiting for him outside the door.

With the departure of Dr. Carruth, Mrs. Whitcomb had gone over to the window and peered out into the misty darkness.

"That other voice sounded like Dr. Gordon's," she announced, flattening her face against the narrow pane, "and whoever it is, it's tall like him. I told Silas that I had a feeling that he'd be coming back some day. Now we shall all find out what called him home so suddenly."

"Maybe you will and maybe you won't," hummed Uncle Gabriel noncommittally.

"Well, I must say," put in Eustasia Whitcomb with an uneasy glance at the door, "that for the sake of the good name of Mary Malvern, he would do well to stay where he belongs. Dr. Carruth may have been right about her adopting Peter Piper, but this is a matter of deeper consequence. The marital bond—"

But she was not permitted to finish her sentence, for it was then that Uncle Gabriel, roused from his usual good temper, arose to his full height, squared his bent shoulders, and looking his opponent full in the face, delivered his ultimatum in a voice that cracked with righteous ire.

"Once for all, Eustasia Whitcomb, I want it understood that

never again in my store is her name to be mentioned in any such connection with his. Mary was kind and friendly to him, the same as she is and has always been to everybody, the same as she is to that blind boy of hers. She's as far above us as—" He paused, his mind incapable for the moment of compassing the distance that separated her from them. "Who else was there on the mountain, except maybe Dr. Carruth, for him to enjoy the company of?"

Who else, indeed? Mrs. Eustasia Whitcomb could, if she had chosen to do so, have found an answer, but, instead, she gathered her voluminous skirts about her as she might have shaken the dust from her feet, and made an abrupt departure.

"The empress is as mad as a hornet," drawled Jed Stone. "If looks could kill."

"We'd have all been dead and in our graves a long time ago, boys," said Uncle Gabriel, picking up from the counter, against which he was leaning, the latest number of *The Mountain Eagle*. "Listen to this, will you? We must give credit where credit is due." In an attitude of decorum and with assumed solemnity, he read:

"When autumn pours her bursting horn
Upon the russet hills,
My heart o'erflows with rapturous joy
Until it almost spills."

"The horn or Eustasia's heart?" interrupted Jed Stone.

Uncle Gabriel waved him to silence and continued:

"Oh, for a thousand tongues to tell
The joys of earth and sky,
So would I talk, and talk, and talk,
From now until I die."

At the closing sentiment one and all threw up their hands. "A thousand tongues, boys, do you hear that?" asked Uncle

Gabriel. "Si has about forgotten how his voice sounds, as it is. I vum, it's a good thing for us that wishes like that don't come true."

Having thrown the paper into the stove, the postmaster, storekeeper, and Justice of the Peace combined began to rattle the cookie cans, his usual manner of indicating that closing time had come.

The hint did not always prove effective, but to-night no one loitered behind the others for a final word. Presently they were all gone, the last spluttering light was extinguished, and Uncle Gabriel was on his way home to regale Martha Ann with an account of the day's events, and to surprise her with the announcement that, if Eustasia Whitcomb's eyesight was as keen as it usually was, Mr. Gordon had returned to the mountains.

"In such case," concluded the old man happily to himself, "he has come, without doubt, for Mary Malvern, and what in creation will she do with Peter Piper now?" But, to be sure, she would take him with her. His lively imagination readily supplied a happy sequel to the entrancing story, the joyful end of which seemed likely to be drawing near. The piper would gain a father in Dr. Gordon, the most wonderful father that any boy could ever hope to have. They would dwell together in the city in grand style,—Mary, and Gordon and the piper, and, as in all good stories, they would "live happily ever after."

It wouldn't be the easiest thing in the world for him and Mother to see her go away from them, after having known her so long, but they would be, as he had told her, the first to wish her happiness, and, more than likely—his face brightened at the thought—they would come back to the mountains summers and live in her house. Certainly Mary would not be able to forget the hills. Clarice, after all, must be a maiden aunt or some other relation who, now that she was well, had no further claim upon Gordon. Otherwise, he would not have

returned so quickly. And what but the desire for Mary would have brought him back?

With these cheerful cogitations in his mind, the ride home seemed less tiresome than usual, and it was with the opinion that Old Hundred was really picking up speed in his old age that Uncle Gabriel was jolted into his dooryard and within the pale of Martha Ann's welcoming light.

XX

It was the last day of autumn, and mellow and warm, as many of the autumn days had been. Peter Piper said that it seemed as if Mother Nature were trying to make up for spring's late arrival by postponing as long as possible the coming of winter. Mary Malvern had taken a couple of books and gone up to Bear Creek Ravine, where she, and Gordon, and the piper had had their last picnic together, now almost four months ago. There had recently been heavy rains and she was forced to pick her way somewhat gingerly over the hollowed-out rocks with their deep-set pools of translucent water.

On a sudden impulse, she had closed school at noon and, having waved her children, delighted over the unexpected holiday, good-by from the doorway, had left everything, and started off in the direction of the trail to the ravine, with the feeling that she had done the only thing possible for her to have done this radiantly beautiful last day of the season.

It was good to be alone and think. After her spring and summer in the open, there were days, now and then, when the four walls of the small brick schoolhouse seemed like so many prison walls, shutting her away from life and freedom. But to-day she was free again. There were no children to be taught; there was no school; there were only the big, understanding hills and the deep, enfolding woods.

Reaching the ravine, after a long, hard climb, she stretched herself out luxuriously on a smooth, flat rock, and opened

one of her books, a worn copy of verse, the first book that Gordon had given to her. But reading for her was impossible. Instinctively, her eyes kept lifting to the hills, and, at length, with an air of abandonment, she laid aside her book.

Before her, in the smoky autumn haze, stretched the gaunt hills, stripped of their gorgeous foliage, but clad in their verdure of everlasting greenness; on all sides towered the dim, hushed woods, faintly colorful with their varied browns and greens. At a little distance from her, a shining silver cascade plunged over a jagged ledge into a basin of churning foam. It was like reading the last page of a much-loved book, or taking leave of a friend, to sit enfolded in the warmth and beauty of such a day. To-morrow there might be a flurry of snow. Swift, sudden changes were not infrequent on the mountain. But this day was hers, hers to enjoy and make the most of, the last day before the coming of winter. And she was resolved to do this by allowing no regret, no bitter thought of the past or fear for the future to creep into her mind. She would keep this day fresh and beautiful in her memory.

Getting to her feet, she ran fleetly along the very edge of the gorge. In one big pool between two rocks, the water was so deep that she had to take off her shoes and stockings and wade across. The water was cold to her feet and ankles, but she splashed back and forth in it as gayly as Peter Piper would have done, and then flew on, the pins slipping from her loosely coiled hair as she ran.

She came, out of breath, to the end of the gorge and climbed to the top of a giant boulder from which, through the mingled greens of pines, and firs, and spruces, she could glimpse the irregular outline of the distant hills. She drew in a long, rapturous breath. If only she might gather them all to her heart and hold them there, the woods, with their tinkling brooks and shimmering cascades; the shadowy

hills; the sky itself, with its wide expanse of blue;—if only she might reach up and pull it down close, close to her.

There was a step on the rocks below her and she started forward, but rather from surprise than alarm. At the next instant, her heart gave a sudden leap, sending the rich color to her face and lips. Slowly she made her way to the rim of the boulder, looked down and caught her breath sharply, covering her eyes with her hands.

"You?" she cried. "You!"

For a minute, Gordon stood quite still, looking up at her. Her eyes, now that her hands were removed from them, he saw were suffused with light, and her lips were trembling. A shaft of sunlight that came filtering through the treetops smoldered in her hair.

"You," she repeated, as, smiling away his offer of assistance, she swung herself down from the rock as easily as a boy could have done.

"You knew that I would come back sometime," he said between assertion and question, as they made their way back down over the rocks, stopping now and then to pick up a hairpin that she had lost on her way up.

"Yes, I have told Peter Piper every day that you were coming sometime. But the *sometime* was getting to look very distant and shadowy. You see, at first, we used to watch for you every day and then when, after a long time, you didn't come —but what's the use of talking about it? You are here now and that's enough for us to know."

She was trembling from the sheer joy of his presence, the sudden awareness of him, that was as keen as pain.

"But how did you happen to look for me up here?" she asked.

"I came last night," he answered. "Something kept me from seeing you then. And this morning you were in school.

I caught a glimpse of you, a long way down the road with a cluster of children around you."

"If I had known, I never could have stayed there. As it was, I left at noon."

"When I went to the schoolhouse early this afternoon and found it locked, then down to your house and found it closed, too, I knew that the day was responsible for your being away, and that you had done just this or something very like it. One of your boys, on his way down the road, told me that you had started off in the direction of the Bear Creek trail, and I took a chance on your being up here at the ravine, maybe because the recollection of our last picnic was in my mind. I found your books down by the cascade and I trailed you up the ravine by the hairpins along the way. But it's rather late in the season, even if it is a particularly warm day, to be going barefoot, isn't it, Mary Malvern?"

"How did you know?" she asked quickly, glancing down at her well-shod feet.

"Foot prints on the rocks," he answered. "Then I knew beyond a doubt that it was you. Nobody else, not even the piper, would be so reckless."

"What a day it is!" he exclaimed, his eyes upon her as he inhaled deeply the acrid fragrance of the firs and spruces. "One of December's blue days. According to the poets, they are usually gray, aren't they?"

"Nothing is gray to-day," she answered thoughtfully, withdrawing her eyes from his. "It's as if everything were dipped in sunlight."

"You have been reading the poets again, I see," he said, endeavoring to speak lightly. "I saw the book, just where you'd left it."

"I tried to read, but there was so much poetry outside of books, that couldn't ever be shut between two covers, I had to give it up."

It seemed almost unbelievable to her that he was there, walking beside her in the old, familiar way, understanding the impulsive mood that had compelled her to turn her back on the schoolhouse and fly to the sweet refuge of the woods. There were so many things that she had planned to tell him, but now that he had come, she could not remember them, could think of very little except commonplaces to say. But it was enough for her to know that he was there.

As usual, he was quiet, but his brevity of speech, she knew from her acquaintance with him, indicated no lack of response in him to her, or to the wonder of the day, or to the enchanting woods, dim-lighted like a vast cathedral where the prayers have been said, the music has been sung, and from which almost every worshiper has departed. But she was there, and he had come, and they two were alone in the dense solitude of sky and woods. It would be a short communion between them, how short she would not spoil the hour by asking him.

"I hadn't any right to close the school, you know," she said, steadying herself on a pointed rock.

"There'll be all the winter to do sums in and read out of the primer, but there'll never be another day—like this, Mary."

He spoke slowly and something in his voice drew her eyes back to his.

"No, I know there won't," she breathed. "This is the very last day—of the autumn." She was going to say "for us," but checked herself, and added presently, "It's unusual for this time of year, so warm and spring-like."

They were back at the little cascade and the book of verse, and she suggested that they sit down right there and rest, with the hills, an ever-changing panorama, spread out before them.

Now that he was with her again, Gordon realized more

than he had in his absence from her, how much he had longed for her nearness, how much he should have to miss all the rest of his life. With every word she uttered, every familiar gesture she made, he was reminded of the transitoriness of her, with a throb of pain. There would be two hours before sunset, two hours with Mary Malvern, and all eternity without her!

She was the one to break the long silence between them, and it was concerning himself that she spoke. "I want to know all about the hospital, first," she said, folding her hands in her lap. "As the piper says, 'please to tell me everything.'"

As eager as he was to hear about herself, he took great comfort in giving her, when she asked him to, an account of some of the things he had been able to accomplish since his return to the hospital. She listened, as she always did, with eager interest that made talking to her a delight. "But it's about you that I want to know," he paused in the middle of a sentence to exclaim. "Just begin with the evening I left and go on from there until now."

"The days are all so nearly alike up here," she laughed quietly, drawing her cape about her, "that it will take only a minute. The big thing I had saved to tell you, you must know, if you have been here since last night, especially if you happened to stop at the post office. Do you know?"

"About the piper?" he asked quickly.

"You do know, and I wanted to tell you myself. I've been thinking how I could surprise you. Just when did you hear about it?"

"I happened to meet Dr. Carruth, and waited for him on the post-office steps while he went in for his mail. Uncle Gabriel was so taken up with conversation that the doctor had to wait some time. He had left the door open, and so I heard. I listened to hear what they were saying."

"And it was about my adopting Peter Piper?"

"Yes, and about your teaching school, and giving music lessons to some little girl who was at home drumming on the window sills for want of something better to play on."

"All that," she said, laughing a little.

He nodded thoughtfully.

"You can't imagine the piper's happiness at having a mother, and," she finished after a little, "it seems very wonderful for me to have been given a son."

Looking into her eyes, dark and splendid with emotion, he was resolved to let his errand go undone. Until now, he had not been sure, but the last doubt in his mind was cleared up by her fervent words.

"Wonderful? Yes," he replied, a world of revelation in his low, deep voice. And she understood as clearly as if she had seen the picture of the mother and her children that hung on the wall of his room at home.

Another long silence followed. Then she said, "If I closed my eyes, I should think that this were a day in spring when Peter Piper came down the trail to tell me that the violets were out. The little new frogs were peeping in the meadow and a whippoorwill kept flitting back and forth over the misty field across the road. Then the moon came up over the hills and silvered the mist until it seemed like a night of magic, a witching hour. A star shot into the valley. It meant that a stranger was coming. Then you came."

"Yes, then I came."

She was quick to catch the inflection of his voice.

"Yes, I understand what you mean, what you are thinking about. You have never forgiven yourself—I have been wanting to say this to you for a long time, but, somehow, when you came, I couldn't find a way to put it so that it would mean just what I wished it to."

"I shall understand, I think," he interposed quietly.

"It's only this—I believe that it was meant that we should

find each other, and at a time when both of us felt very much alone. You told me once that your coming here the way you did had all been a mistake, but do you know," she said, leaning forward in her earnestness, "that the one thing I couldn't let go out of my life is our friendship and the thoughts of all those days together. And it's because I feel that you're there, somewhere, and that I know you, that I can bear to have you go. I shall be doing my little work up here in a better, happier way than I should be otherwise. I shall be stronger always for thinking of your strength."

"There isn't a day, Mary, that I don't have greater courage because of you."

"Then, aren't these things for us to be eternally thankful for?" she asked, lifting earnest eyes to his anxious face.

"They are indeed. But sometimes flesh and blood rebels against having only memories. It cries out for the sight, and touch, and sound of what it loves. It demands possession. And it takes all one's courage not to listen to that cry."

"Love has to be very big sometimes, doesn't it?" she asked.

"It's the bigness, and strength, and glory of you that I have always associated with the bigness, and strength, and glory of the hills. They are things that it is hard to measure up to." He got up from his rock, above her, and came down to sit beside her.

"If there were only one thing that I could do for you. I thought that there was going to be when I came last night, but something has happened since which makes that impossible, but if there is ever any need of me, anything that I can do for you or the piper, there's nothing can keep me away from you. I haven't asked you about Peter Piper because Dr. Carruth and Uncle Gabriel both gave such good accounts of him."

"He's been growing stronger every day, and every day I've been letting him walk a little farther to test his strength out."

"He had unusual vitality or he never would have recovered so quickly. I was counting on twice the time. Where is he to-day? I expected to find him at your house."

"He's with Aunt Martha. I don't like to leave him alone too much. I'll be glad when he is able to go to school with me. You can't think how wonderful it is for me to know that he is mine to keep, that nothing can ever snatch him away from me, that is, nothing but death and, somehow, I believe that the piper is going to live, and grow, and become a great man. All mothers believe that of their sons, don't they?" she asked with a bright smile.

The mellow haze melted into somber grayness as the sun dipped toward the hills. There was no sound except the sharp tinkle of the mountain brook, and the wind, like swift, rushing rain, in the trees.

"Are you warm enough, Mary?" he asked, as she drew her cape about her with a little shudder.

"Oh, yes, I am. Quite warm. But in December one can't deceive oneself into thinking that it's summer, long after midday."

Suddenly she started to her feet. "Listen," she cried, amazement in her eyes and voice.

Somewhere from within the deep recesses of the wood, a hermit thrush was singing!

Together they stood motionless in the hush of the dimming light until the rapturous burst of melody had ended in five twirling notes as clear as winter starlight.

"I can't understand it," she whispered. "The thrushes have all gone. Hark! There it is again, a little nearer. How do you suppose he happened to be left behind the others? He sounds a long way off."

"He has gone now," said Gordon. "It's very still again."

But the next minute, the rapturous, upflinging notes made music of the silence that enfolded them.

"Oh, I know," broke from her, the perplexed lines clearing from her forehead. "It's the piper. He is out looking for me. He has learned to imitate the hermit thrush, but his flute never sounded so birdlike before. Perhaps that's because he is so far away. We really must go now."

"It's not quite sunset; we were to stay until then."

"I wonder," she said, when they were seated on the rock again, "just what I am going to do with the piper. There's only one thing that I'm sure of. He is not going to stay in the mountains all his life and play his flute. He's going away some day. He must study, find out what he can do best, and learn to do it. It's been sweet planning out the years ahead. I've thought that if I could teach him evenings for a few years longer, we might, perhaps, by that time go to some college town where there would be a better chance for him. I could hire a little house and maybe let rooms, or do sewing for the students. I should study with him every evening and help him in every way I could. Is it all impossible?" she asked, thrusting her hands forward in the little gesture that he so well remembered. "If you could tell me that it isn't too much to expect—"

It was in his power to relieve her of all her anxiety for the piper, but the very thing that would make the way easier for her would, at the same time, he knew, plant it full of thorns. Her words had startled within his mind the question that he had put aside as irrevocably answered when she had told him, with shining eyes, of the new and wonderful gift that was hers. He must not do anything to make things hard for her. But the song of the hermit thrush was coming nearer, growing more flute-like, and there was only a moment in which to make up his mind whether or not to disclose to her his errand. After all, it was for her to decide concerning her boy. And yet he would willingly assume the responsibility of the decision if, by so doing, he could spare her any pain. It was,

indeed, not for the piper, much as he loved the boy, but for Mary Malvern that he had come back to the mountains. And he had returned full of anticipation because of the joy that he felt sure his errand would bring her.

"You think that I am looking too far ahead," she said, the animation gone from her face.

"No, it isn't that. It's going to be a long, uphill pull for you, Mary, and—" He stopped there.

"And what?" she asked, her lips parted, her eyebrows slightly lifted. She would work her fingers to the bone rather than not accomplish what she set out to. She would not fail the piper.

But there was no need of her telling him that, he reminded her. That was just what he was afraid that she would do, work her fingers to the bone.

The flute again, coming nearer.

"It is something about the piper, isn't it?" she demanded, trembling with apprehension. "Tell me, because we must go down now. He mustn't try to climb up here. He isn't strong enough. I am his mother now and that gives me the right to know, doesn't it? I can't understand why you find it so hard to tell me."

But there was no need of his telling her for, suddenly, whether through intuition or instinct he could not be sure, she knew, beyond any doubt, what he had come to say.

"Oh, I understand," she breathed, starting down the trail. "You don't have to tell me. You have come to take him away from me."

She spoke slowly and as if the words were wrung from her heart, and her white face revealed the pain that lay behind them.

"But, of course, you didn't," she went on in the next breath, nervously. "That was just a foolish fancy of mine. Tell me that it was."

The strained anxiety of her face compelled him to answer her directly. "I have been very blundering and stupid again," he replied, taking her arm to help her down the rocky trail. "Don't think of all this again. I wouldn't take him away from you for worlds."

"Then you did come for that," she cried, breaking away from him. "You can't deceive me; it isn't in you to pretend the least little bit. And I always want the truth."

She walked on a few steps ahead of him, wearily, and with her arms hanging at her sides.

"It's only because I have been thinking of your happiness, Mary, that I haven't told you," he said. "I meant to at once, but something about you, when you spoke of him, stopped me."

"But don't you see that I have to know, now?" she insisted, her lips tightening.

"When I found out last night," he began, at last, "that the Skinners had gone away and left the piper to you, I was undecided what to do, and I made up my mind that I would wait until I was sure before I spoke."

"Yes, go on, please."

"You did not realize how much you interested Mr. Howard in Peter Piper or, for that matter, how much you interested him in yourself. He has never been so happy as he is now and he says that he owes all his happiness to you for showing him what an old fool he was. That's the way he expresses it."

"He was on the point of sending for you, anyway. He would have, in time. He acknowledged that, himself."

Now that he had begun his story, Gordon, quite characteristically, came directly to the point. "Mr. Howard wishes very much to take the piper and educate him, Mary. There is a school for blind children very near his home. He will send him through that and, then, to college with a special teacher to help him with his notes and everything he can't do for

himself. Or he will give him, if it seems wise, the very best musical education possible. There'll be no end to what he will do for him, but he won't do what you might be afraid of—he won't pamper, or baby, or pity him. He says that he wants him to brighten his house with his flute, wants him to play it there just as he plays it in the hills. He has a motherly housekeeper—Aunt Martha reminds me of her—and she would take good care of him. I was to try to persuade the Skinners to let me have the boy, but, even with their consent, I was not to take him under any consideration, without your giving yours, for he agreed with me that, by every moral right, the boy belongs to you. The piper was to come back to the mountains summers to be with you.

"When I tell Mr. Howard how everything has come about, he'll understand. He will see that you are right in keeping Peter Piper. I think that he would even want you to keep him as I want you to, now."

"But every word you have spoken, every tone of your voice has been pleading for him," she told him, over her shoulder. "Play his flute there in that big, lonely house as he does in the hills? He couldn't. I know, because I have been there. Don't you think," she questioned, "that a mother—he's never had one before—means more to him now than anything Mr. Howard can give him? Oh, please thank him for me, but tell him that I can't let him take the boy away from me."

It was so dark in the woods that Gordon could not see her face, but he knew that she was crying, softly.

"He wouldn't mean to take him away from you, Mary," he said, touched by her grief. "You would still be the piper's mother and he would think of you up here in the hills, expecting big things of him, waiting for him."

"But there'd be times when just thinking of me wouldn't do, when he'd want to touch me, to feel my arms around him, and hear my voice, when, unconsciously, he would reach

out for me and I wouldn't be there. But you can't understand."

"But I do understand, Mary, better than I understand anything else in this world."

"You see that I can't give him up," she whispered, as they went on down the trail, faintly bright with the last colors of the sunset's glow.

"I do see. But there will be some day, perhaps, things that we can do to help you. You will let us? You must promise that." They were nearing the end of the darkening trail and, taking her arm again, he said, "I wish that this short day could have lasted longer, Mary."

She stifled back the sob that was in her throat. "Oh, I wish that it could have lasted forever. You will come down once before you go away? He will be so disappointed if you don't. He must have gotten tired of waiting for me and gone home. We're almost there now, ourselves. And there's the first star."

They found the piper, wrapped in his coat, under the cherry tree, with his flute.

"Mother," he called, as the gate clicked open.

"Yes, Peter Piper, coming," she answered buoyantly.

"Why, Mother, what is it?" he cried, springing toward her.

"Here we are, dear," she replied, holding out her arms.

"You and—"

She could not answer, but Gordon spoke his name. The piper's face was turned from them, but they both knew that the radiance of joy had, in that instant, lighted his unseeing eyes.

"All the time," he was saying, as he clung to the man's hand, "Mother has promised me that some day you would come, and now you have come home!"

XXI

The following day, which was cold and cloudy, Mary Malvern had mostly to herself, for Peter Piper was absent from Gordon only during the few minutes which the latter took to call upon Aunt Martha and Dr. Carruth.

"He was going this noon, Mother," the boy announced when he came upon her in her living room, mending his torn blouse, "but I made him promise to stay over to-day. There was a place I'd never taken him to. I wish he would come back here to live, don't you?"

"No."

"But, Mother—"

If he could have seen her face at that moment, young as he was, he would have guessed her reason. As it was, his forehead gathered into questioning lines. But she made no explanation and after a short time, when he thought that Gordon's calls must be over, he ran back to his friend. Mary had told him as she watched him restlessly fingering his flute, that he was hoarding the minutes of this day as greedily as ever a miser hoarded his pieces of gold, and giving up any one of them as grudgingly. In answer he had reminded her that the day was hurrying by on wings and there was yet so much to say, so much to do.

When he had gone piping up the trail, she sat for a long time holding in her hands the blouse with its half mended tear, and turning over many things in her troubled mind. As she thought and wondered without ever seeming to arrive at

any definite conclusion, the bright colors in which she had pictured all their future days, hers and the piper's, grew dim before her eyes. The little house in the college town where he and she were to live together, and the evenings there, with the piper at his lessons, and herself busied with something or other to keep them happily there; Commencement day with its caps and gowns, and throngs of people, and white parchments; and her son, straight and tall, his eager hand outstretched for one—these were visions that faded into obscurity, only empty dreams that she had been foolish enough to believe that she could make come true.

She seemed to be looking at the hills, across which the mid-afternoon shadows were lengthening, but she was only dimly conscious of the shadows or even of the hills themselves. She was seeing the piper curled up on the divan in Mr. Howard's library, his dark head against the red cushions while with his sensitive fingers he read the book in his hand; the piper in the wonderful old room, standing beside the piano, at which she had sat to play, his flute at his lips, making the somber house musical with the songs of thrushes and of larks; the piper at his school, surrounded by books and books, and by boys and girls who, like himself, had learned to see without eyes; the piper no longer a solitary little figure climbing jagged, uncertain trails that might, for all her careful planning, in the end lead nowhere, but a well-companionsed, independent creature, walking with strong, determined strides along a sure, smooth highway that was bound to lead him to all that she could ever wish him to attain. Should she put out a detaining hand to keep him to the old trails or should she let him go? She searched her heart for an answer to the question, but it was not there, even though the colors of her old pictures had come to appear drab beside the brilliant ones that Gordon's matter-of-fact statement of Mr. Howard's proposition had presented to her mind.

She finished the blouse, folded it carefully, laid it reluctantly in her basket, and stretched her slim hands, that ached to do for him, out before her. It was going to be, as Gordon had said, an uphill road for her, but, oh, the joy of climbing with the boy step by step, and of watching his constant progress upward would more than make up for any little discomfitures along the way.

But in comparison to what Mr. Howard could do for him, there was, after all, so little in her power to give him. It was her own longing to keep him that was holding him back, holding him back from the Glory Trail just as somebody or something had always held her back.

Mechanically she went about her work, half listening every minute for the flute's familiar note and dreading to hear it. In the late afternoon, she went up to the garret, and from a small, battered horse-hair trunk pulled out a man's blue serge suit, out of style, but showing scarcely any signs of wear. She stood with it in her arms beside the small diamond-paned window from which she saw two figures, a man and a boy, coming through the fir grove. The man's hand was on the boy's shoulder and they were talking earnestly together. It came to her more strongly than ever how much the boy's association with this man had done for him. Under his sure, kind guidance, the piper had grown before her very eyes. And Dr. Gordon had promised to see him every day at Mr. Howard's. If she should let him go—

Sunrise Mountain looked very bleak and forbidding, almost glowering in its cold austerity. Over it the clouds hung gray and heavy. The atmosphere of the garret room seemed stifling to her and she raised the window. What a merry song the boy was piping! The Spring Song and spring so very far away. The next minute he was at the foot of the stairs, calling to her. She closed the window and moved toward the door,

pulled it slowly open, and answered, "Yes, Peter Piper, I'm coming down to you."

He was alone in the kitchen. "But where is Mr. Gordon?" she asked, the blue suit trembling in her arms.

"He walked home with me, Mother, and I made him promise to come down in the morning before he goes. He's going to send me books, and music, more than he ever did before. Every month he says he'll send a box of books. I told him that I wished he were my father."

"And he said—what?"

"He said," repeated Peter Piper slowly, "that having you was enough for any boy and that you would never fail me in anything. I don't know why he told me that."

She forgot, for the moment, that the boy could not see her, and turned her face away from him.

"I'll go get the kindlings now, Mother, shan't I?" he asked, laying down his flute.

"No, not now, dear. There's something I want to tell you."

"Something you want to tell me?" he repeated, perplexed at the gravity of her voice.

"Yes, Piper, in here," she said, leading the way to the living room. "Come now, dear. You can get the wood later."

He followed her to the fireplace and stood beside her rocker with his slim brown hand held in her firm, tender clasp.

"Do you remember, Peter Piper," she asked, "the spring night—the night that you found that the violets had come out, and the star shot over the mountain?"

He nodded.

"And do you remember—but I know that you do—something you told me that night, your own secret that you gave to me, and the promise I made you then?"

He nodded again and she continued quietly, "Well, Piper, what I have to tell you is only this. The time has come for me to keep that promise and I'm going to let you go."

"You are going to let me go—but where, Mother?" he cried, dropping to the stool at her feet and resting his head against her knee.

"Over the Glory Trail with Mr. Gordon, Piper." She bent over him until her lips rested on his dark hair. "That was a night of silver moonlight and of magic, you remember, and now this magical chance for you has come, sooner than either of us expected."

She had tried to speak in a matter-of-fact tone, but Peter Piper, sensitive to the slightest sound, heard the tears in her voice.

"But why are you sending me away from you?"

She told him everything, weaving all the stray threads that Gordon had given her into a beautiful pattern. What she had to say, like most good stories, began with "once upon a time," and, like all good stories, had a happy ending. She threw her whole soul into the telling of it and, after much reasoning with him, she made him see, in spite of his sturdy determination not to leave her, that he would make her happier by going than he ever could by staying with her on the mountain.

When he had fallen asleep that night, she tiptoed into his room to open his window, which, in his excitement, he had forgotten to do. There were tears on his long dark lashes, but on his lips was a smile that nothing but joyful anticipation could have put there. With a little stab of pain, she bent to kiss him, but quickly withdrew her lips lest she disturb his sleep. Her boy, the piper, but, after all, not hers to keep.

To Gordon early the next morning she sent Peter Piper with a note. The man opened it with grave expectation of what the contents would be.

"It was something you said to the piper that made me see," she had written in characteristic frankness. "If you can wait a day longer, I shall be very grateful. I can have him ready by

to-morrow morning. You and Mr. Howard will have my eternal gratitude."

Gordon was sorry but not surprised, for he had known from the first that she was going to let the piper go. But he wondered whether, if he had the errand to do all over again, he would allow her to make the decision. As she had said, the boy was hers, but even he could not come before Mary Malvern in Gordon's consideration. If he could be sure that he was smoothing the way ahead for her, he would not regret so keenly this thing that he was doing, but who could be sure of anything except the present? And that itself seemed hazardous and uncertain.

The following morning, Mary Malvern, who was watching for Gordon, saw him at last coming through the fir grove, and when he reached the steps, was at the door to meet him. Her face was pale and he thought that she looked more tired than he had ever seen her.

"Here he is all ready," she said brightly as Gordon stepped into the hall. They stood looking up to the head of the stairs where the piper was waiting, dressed in a dark blue serge suit with broad white collar and red plaid tie. His dark hair, usually rumpled, was parted smoothly on the side.

"Now isn't my runaway piper of the hills changed into a very proper city boy?" she demanded gayly. "Down there he can be Peter Malvern if he likes, but up here he's always going to be the Piper."

"Mother made it out of one of her father's suits," said the boy proudly. "She sat up all night to finish it and got up early this morning to press it."

"That sounds rather contradictory, dear," she laughed.

"Well, almost all night. It's the very nicest suit I've ever had."

"And I doubt, Piper, if you will ever have another quite as good," said the man, his eyes on Mary Malvern.

She was all joy and animation, but Gordon could see that her vivacity was forced and that underneath it were feelings too deep for any expression. He was acutely aware that each one of them, for the time being, was, as it were, behind a mask, pretending to feel differently from what he really did, guilty of the most extravagant make-believe, and that, because of this, never had they seemed so near to and, at the same time, so far away from each other.

"Peter Piper wants me to walk up the trail as far as the notch," she said. "You are going to meet Jed Stone just beyond there, Uncle Gabriel told me. Get your flute, Son. It's time to go. You don't want to have to hurry."

They went out the door together, down the garden path, and through the gate, the boy clinging tightly to her hand.

It was a cold, dismal day, and the hills stood out bare and desolate against a drab, threatening sky.

It seemed to her that it had never been so short a distance to the notch. The same thought must have been in the boy's mind for presently he remarked, "We never got here so soon before, Mother."

"It's good-by now, Peter," she said quietly, loosening her hand from his, "but when spring comes and the violets—"

In an instant, his arms were around her neck and he was sobbing on her breast. She made no attempt to restrain him or to free herself from his tightening clasp.

"But I'll be waiting for you, you know, dear," she murmured, her lips close to his hair. "Think how we shall both be looking for the first signs of spring and wondering if they will never appear. You will be on the watch for the jump-ropes, the marbles, and the hurdy-gurdies—you have never listened to a hurdy-gurdy, Peter Piper—and I'll have my eyes out for the larks, and the snails, and the violets. Think how much we shall have to tell each other, just comparing notes

all the time. It will be no end of fun." And her voice was full of gladness.

"But I want you now, Mother. To-night—"

"To-night I'll be busy, you know. Little Judith Morris is coming for her lesson, and Uncle Gabriel will stop with the mail and tell me how Mrs. Whitcomb and everybody is talking about your going away. Next thing they'll all be saying that Seraphina was right and that a prince from over distant seas has come to claim you."

"Not a prince, but a Mr. Bellerophon," he corrected, raising his head.

"Yes," she went on, taking courage at his brightening face, "a real Mr. Bellerophon. And to-night—you started to say something about to-night, didn't you?—I can just see you in the big, beautiful library. And you can think, 'Why, Mother has been here, too, and sat in this very chair, the big one right by the tall reading lamp, and she played on this piano, and Mr. Howard talked to her the way he's talking to me now.' And that will make it seem that we are very near each other."

With a sudden gesture, he reached his hands up to her eyes. "But you are not crying, Mother."

"Crying? Of course, I'm not. You didn't think that I was crying, did you? I'll have to be going back now," she said, turning for the first time to the man. "I mustn't be late for school. But I'll stay here, Piper, until you're out of sight. You play your flute and I'll listen until I can't hear it any longer."

She stood for a moment very still with the boy's head against her heart, her hair, with its smoldering fires, blown all about her bright, serious face.

"There's no one else that I would let take him away," she said, gently releasing the boy and giving Gordon both her hands. "But this that you are doing for him is the crowning

of our friendship. Our friendship," she repeated slowly, "that no one can ever take away."

The boy had moved a little distance away from them and she said quietly, "We had our day up at the ravine. This day is his—we must keep it so—this and all the days to come. It will help us both, if we remember that."

"But you, Mary—"

"Every day that is his will be mine, too," she answered bravely, "because I am his mother and he is my son."

He bent over her hands, and touched them both with his lips, tenderly. "I shall remember," he assured her in his usual deep, steadfast voice, told her good-by, and with Peter Piper left her alone at the notch road.

Once, before he and the piper turned the bend that hid her from their view, he looked back and saw her standing straight and motionless, her dark cape blowing in the wind. He caught the boy up in his arms and held him high.

"Wave to her, Piper," he said. "She is up there still, at the notch road, listening for your song."

When he had put the boy down, he stood for a moment, absorbed in thought, his eyes enfolding her. She was just where he would always think of her as being, on her mountain, which in its loftiness seemed to reach the very stars. Some day the piper would be coming back to her, but presently the bend in the trail would shut her forever away from himself.

The woman waited until, in the windings and hollows of the trail, the piper's song was lost to her. Through force of habit, her lips had formed the words:

"The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hillside's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;

The snail's on the thorn;
God's in His heaven;
All's right with the world."

The cheerless December day was a contradiction to the joyful song, but the fact seemed to make no impression upon the woman as she listened, her lips slightly parted, her calm, unsmiling eyes full of distance. Once she flung out her arms passionately to the hills and stifled back a cry, then turned resolutely and walked back, slowly, to the schoolhouse.

As she moved, stiffly erect, across the strip of woods that lay just beyond the notch, her arms hanging limply at her sides, it seemed to her for the moment that the life had gone out of her and that something other than herself was mechanically impelling her body forward.

The dead leaves crackled beneath her feet; the dry branches of the trees snapped and rattled against one another; a little flurry of snow, driven by a headlong gust of wind, came whirling noisily about her head, and a flock of wild geese went honking past her on their tardy journey southward. Sounds of approaching winter were they all, but they were wholly lost upon her, for, suddenly, above them all and as if the music were borne to her from afar, she seemed to hear the clear, silvery tones of a flute piping on, and on, and forever on—the piper's joyous, abiding song of spring.

The End

THE READER, THE AUTHOR, AND THE PUBLISHER

A book is a personal thing. The author has put much of himself into it. It has aroused the interest and enthusiasm of the publisher who believes in it enough to add it to his list. It has brought something to the reader—entertainment, inspiration, education—or he would not have read it to the end.

Here then are three persons keenly interested in this one very animate thing. Why shouldn't they know more of each other?

You have found something to hold you in this volume. Do you realize what it would mean to the author if you told him how it affected you?

And think of the publisher. He is trying to produce distinctly worthwhile books; to make an imprint stand for the good things in literature. If he has succeeded in some measure, it would be an encouragement to hear of it.

Both the author and the publisher would like to get better acquainted with the reader and the only way that can be done is for you to sit down and send them a line.



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